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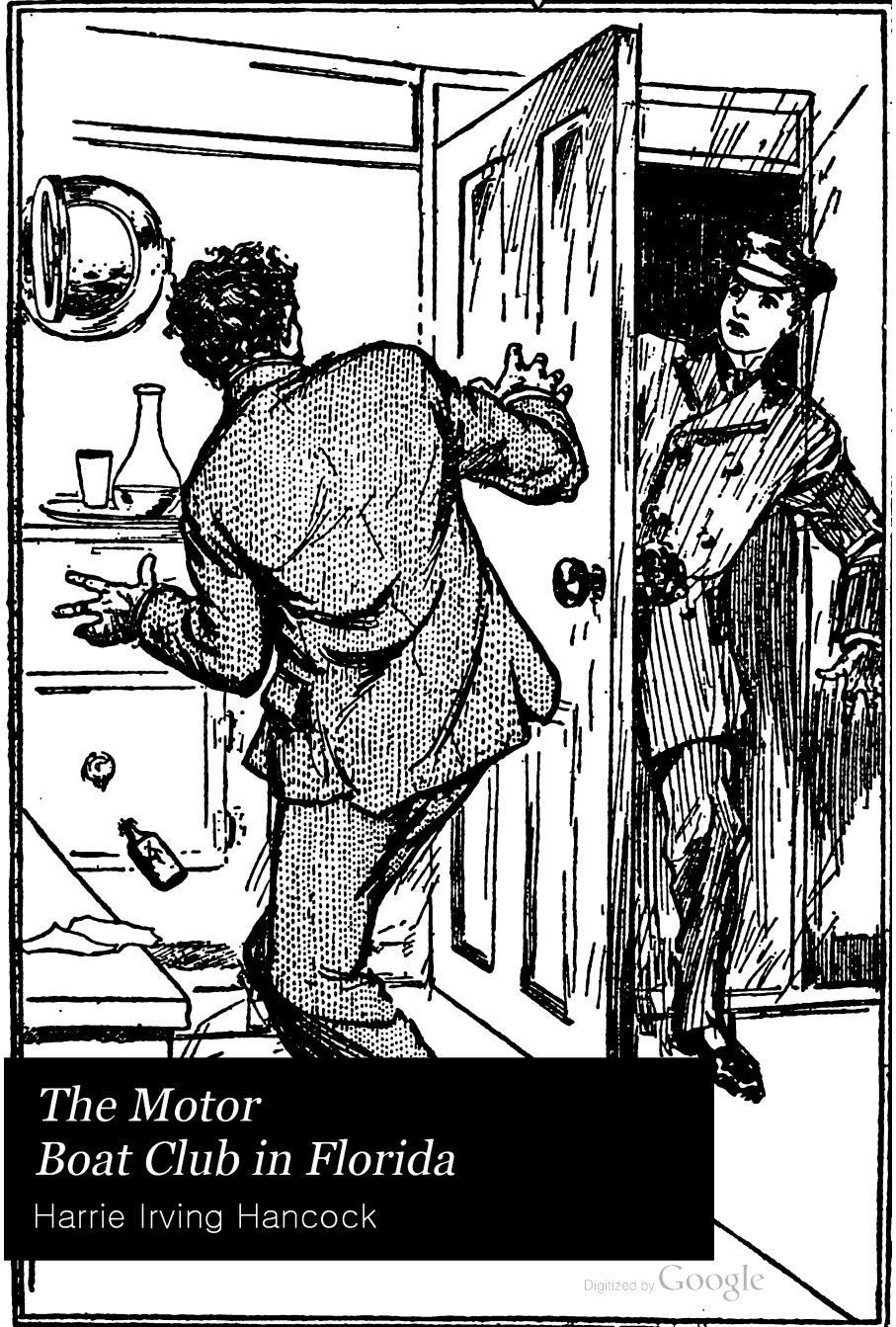

The Motor Boat Club in Florida

Harrie Irving Hancock

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Dixon Became Strangely Agitated.

Frontispiece.

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The Motor Boat Club in Florida

OR

Laying the Ghost of Alligator Swamp

By

H. IRVING HANCOCK

Author of The Motor Boat Club of the Kennebec, The Motor Boat Club at Nantucket, The Motor Boat Club off Long Island, The Motor Boat Club and the Wireless, etc., etc.

Illustrated

PHILADELPHIA
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The Motor Boat Club in Florida

CHAPTER I

A KINK IN THE GULF STREAM

"REALLY, I can hardly believe that it's winter at all," declared Mrs. Tremaine, languidly, as she threw open her deck coat. "I find it hard——"

"Now, my dear, don't try to do anything hard. It's sure to fatigue you," laughed Henry Tremaine, coming up from the cabin companionway, where he had paused long enough to light a pipe.

"But here it is," argued Mr. Tremaine's pretty young wife, "well into the month of December. We are out at sea, out of sight of land, save for a few of these horrid keys. There's hardly any breeze; the sun is warm—so warm, in fact, that I am afraid it will work ravages with my complexion. And, actually, the air is so warm and so full of indolence that I feel more

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inclined to go below and sleep than to do anything else."

Though Mrs. Tremaine was not more than twenty-four years of age, her husband was a middle-aged man who had seen many more nooks of the world than she had.

"My dear," he answered, "you are just beginning to experience the charm of the Florida winter."

"It *is* delightful," she assented. "Yet, it is so warm that the feeling one has is almost uncanny."

"If you're on deck in a few hours," broke in Captain Tom Halstead, smilingly, "I'll promise you much cooler winds, Mrs. Tremaine. You're in the Gulf Stream, just now, and on an unusually mild day."

"Don't we remain in the Gulf Stream all through the present voyage?" asked the pretty young matron, vaguely.

"Oh, no, indeed, madam. We're almost out of it now, in fact. You see, we're in the Florida Straits, between southernmost Florida and Cuba, and therefore in the very track of the Gulf Stream. Even at our slow cruising speed we shall soon be past Key West. After that we shall steer in a more northerly direction. It's four o'clock now. By eleven to-night we shall be between the Marquesas Keys and Dry Tortu-

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gas. By then we shall have been for some time out of the warm Gulf Stream, and the air will be much cooler."

"But the wind is from the south, and has been all day," objected Mrs. Tremaine, languidly. "It will still be following us."

"Possibly," assented Captain Tom Halstead.

"And the south wind is always mild and friendly," pursued the young woman.

"Is it?" chuckled Halstead.

"Isn't it?"

"I trust it will be so to the end of the present voyage," amiably replied the young skipper of the motor boat cruiser "Restless." "Yet, at this time of the year, some of the worst gales come out of the south."

As Captain Tom finished speaking he stepped aft to the very stern of the boat. He remained for some moments intently studying the weather.

The "Restless," a fifty-five foot speedy cruiser, was now going along at the comparatively slow gait of twelve and a half miles an hour. She could go at more than double that speed, but on a long voyage it was wise to travel more moderately and burn much less gasoline in proportion.

Captain Tom Halstead had just come on deck, from a berth in the motor room forward. His

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chum, Joe Dawson, the engineer of the "Restless," was now on the bridge deck, where he had taken his trick at the wheel while the young skipper snatched some four hours' sleep.

Captain Halstead figured on reaching Oyster Bay by four o'clock the following morning, thence proceeding to the mouth of the Caloosahatchee River. This country is on the west coast of Florida, below Tampa Bay.

Though Tom Halstead did not tell his passengers so, he had been called a little ahead of time, just in order that he might look at the weather. Young Halstead—he was but sixteen years of age—had just come aft when he joined briefly in the conversation with Mr and Mrs. Tremaine.

Now, after gazing to the southward some little time, he turned and went forward.

"Does look nasty, doesn't it, Joe?" he murmured in his chum's ear. Joe Dawson, giving the wheel a turn, nodded silently.

"I'm glad you called me, old fellow," Tom went on.

"Nervous, old chap?" inquired Joe, glancing keenly at the skipper.

"No; not exactly," smiled the youthful captain. "Yet, in strange waters, so full of keys and reefs, I'm not exactly fond of a storm."

"Why not change the course, then, and go

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to the west of Dry Tortugas?" suggested Joe Dawson. "Then you'd have clearer water."

"And be some hours later in reaching the river," rejoined Halstead. "Mr. Tremaine has made it clear to me that he wants to eat breakfast on land. I don't believe there's much danger, anyway, in the channel between Marquesas and Dry Tortugas. The charts are rather reassuring."

Tom sighed slightly, though there was the same cheery look in his eyes as he took the wheel from his chum.

Joe Dawson, happening to glance aft, saw a girlish figure come up out of the companionway and sink down into a deck chair beside young Mrs. Tremaine. The new arrival on deck was Ida Silsbee, a dark, really beautiful girl of nineteen, in appearance a decided contrast to blond Mrs. Tremaine. Ida Silsbee, too, was ordinarily active and energetic—another respect in which she differed radically from her friend.

"Now, I can chase Dixon out of the motor room," muttered Joe, in a low voice. "I don't like the fellow down there with the motors, yet it isn't nice to be rude to him."

Tom nodded. His thoughts were on course and weather.

Joe dropped down into the motor room, the

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door of which was close to the wheel. Lounging on one of the seats, smoking a cigarette, was Oliver Dixon, a smooth-faced, dark brown-haired young man of ultra-fashionable appearance. His was a handsome face, and the brown eyes could light up most tenderly. The young man's mouth was far from being weak looking; on the contrary it was framed by thin lips, and had, at times, a wholly cruel look. Yet he was of a type of man that makes friends readily.

From the start of the voyage, at St. Augustine, far up on the east coast of Florida, Joe had taken an unaccountable dislike to the dandyish young man.

"Really wonderful, the way these motors work, Dawson," observed Mr. Dixon, looking up as Joe entered.

"Yes," nodded Joe. "A little oil, fed steadily, and they go on turning the propeller shaft day after day, if necessary. Miss Silsbee is on deck, and looks as though she had had a wonderfully refreshing nap."

Dixon rose, stretched, went up the short steps, tossed his cigarette overboard, then strolled aft.

"Didn't take long to get rid of that chap," grinned Joe, talking in an undertone, as he stepped up to his chum's side once more. Looking out of the corner of one eye, Dawson saw

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Dixon talking animatedly with Ida Silsbee, who did not seem in the least bored by his company.

"Notice how the wind's freshening, Joe?" asked the young skipper, two minutes later.

"Yes; and a bad looking haze rising, too," nodded Dawson. "I don't like the weather's looks."

"No more do I. Joe, we'll be fighting our way through a southerly gale all night."

"All gales look alike to me," laughed the young engineer. "We've weathered every other gale in the past. I don't believe we'll go down in this one."

"Oh, the 'Restless' is staunch enough, as far as seaworthiness goes," retorted Halstead. "All that can possibly make us uneasy is the dread that we might hit some uncharted reef."

From the talk of the chums it appeared plainly enough that, though they spoke easily, they much wished the coming night were through with, and that they had their boat inside of Oyster Bay.

Their boat—yes. They owned this handsome craft, did these two boys, and had come into the possession of it through deeds of daring and sterling seamanship.

Readers of the preceding volumes of this series are aware of how Tom Halstead and Joe Dawson, born near the mouth of the Kennebec

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River, in Maine, came to handle the motor cruiser of George Prescott, a broker of Boston. Aided by their employer the boys went through some rousing adventures in breaking up the crew of Smugglers' Island. As a result of the fine seamanship displayed by these two youths, Mr. Prescott had conceived the idea of founding the Motor Boat Club of the Kennebec. This club, now deservedly famous, was composed, at first, of Maine boys born of seafaring stock and trained to meet the dangers of salt water life. By degrees boys in other sections of the Atlantic coast, similarly trained to the sea life, and to the handling of motors, had been added to the club.

All this was outlined in the first volume, "THE MOTOR BOAT CLUB OF THE KENNEBEC." In the second volume, "THE MOTOR BOAT CLUB AT NANTUCKET," was narrated how Tom and Joe, with the help of a Nantucket boy who was soon added to the club, solved the mystery of the abduction of the Dunstan heir, at the same time going through a maze of thrilling adventures. In the third volume, "THE MOTOR BOAT CLUB OFF LONG ISLAND," we find Tom and Joe, reinforced by a Long Island youth, Hank Butts, serving two financiers, Francis Delavan and Eben Moddridge, through a long sea chase and helping to break up a Wall Street conspiracy. For their loyalty and in recognition of the amaz-

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ing perils the boys had cheerfully encountered, Francis Delavan had presented the two chums with the "Restless," while Hank Butts had been rewarded with a smaller motor craft for use along the southern coast of Long Island.

In the volume just before the present one, "The Motor Boat Club and the Wireless," we found Tom, Joe and Hank all three again at sea, having chartered the "Restless" to one Powell Seaton, for what they thought would be a very quiet cruise. Having the motor cruiser equipped with a wireless telegraph apparatus, which Joe Dawson had fitted himself to operate, our young Motor Boat Club friends found themselves again suddenly plunged into adventures of the most exciting description.

At the close of the engagement with Mr. Seaton, Hank Butts had felt it best to return to his Long Island home and his aged parents, but Tom and Joe had gradually cruised south along the coast, making more than a living in chartering their fine craft to a number of different sailing parties.

At St. Augustine, Henry Tremaine had chartered the "Restless" to take himself and his party southward around the coast of Florida, and then northward again, up the west coast as far as Oyster Bay. The charter was to run for a month, and Skipper Tom understood that there

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would be considerable cruising along the Florida keys during that period.

Mrs. Tremaine was a bride of a year, being her husband's second wife. Ida Silsbee was an heiress, the daughter of one of Mr. Tremaine's friends, now deceased, and was now Mr. Tremaine's ward. Oliver Dixon was the cousin of a schoolgirl friend of Miss Silsbee's. The Tremaines, having met him at St. Augustine, and being pleased with the young man, had invited him to join them on the present cruise.

As for Dixon, he had been greatly attracted to Ida Silsbee from the first moment of meeting.

Captain Tom had understood that Mr. Tremaine owned some sort of winter home along the Caloosahatchee River.

There were but two staterooms aboard the "Restless." One of these was occupied by the ladies, the other by Mr. Tremaine and Mr. Dixon. At night, Captain Tom, when not on deck, converted one of the cabin seats into a berth. Joe slept, when he could find time for sleep, in one of the bunks of the motor room, not caring to be far from his engines.

A third member of the crew, for this run only, was Ham Mockus, a negro in his twenties, who served as cook and steward. He had shipped only in order to reach his home near Oyster Bay.

"Going to turn in, Joe?" asked Halstead, as

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the two chums stood together on the bridge deck.

"Not so close to supper," laughed Joe. "I may get a little nap afterwards. But——"

Dawson paused, as though almost ashamed to voice his thought.

"You think it's going to be a case of all hands on duty all through the night, eh?" laughed Halstead.

"Pretty likely," nodded Joe. "And I guess I'd better tumble Ham out of his bunk. It's time he was going to the galley."

"Yes," nodded Skipper Halstead. "Tell Ham to get the meal on as early as he can. It's going to be rough weather for serving a meal."

As Joe stepped down the short flight of steps to the motor room, a loud, prolonged snore greeted him.

"Come along, now! Tumble out of that!" called Joe, good-naturedly, bending over the bunk in which the colored steward, lying on his back, was blissfully sleeping.

"E-e-eh? W'ut?" drowsed Ham Mockus.

"Get up and get your galley fire going. You want to rush the supper, too," added Joe, half dragging the steward from his berth. "It's just as well to wake up, Ham, and to be in a hurry. You needn't tell the ladies, and scare 'em, but there's going to be a hard blow to-night."

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"A stohm, sah?" demanded the negro, showing the whites of his eyes.

"A big one, unless I miss my guess."

"Fo' de Lawd's sake, sah!" gasped the colored steward. "An' in dis little bit uv a gas-tub, at dat!"

"Avast there!" growled Joe. "I'll kick your starboard light overboard if you call this craft names. You'd better understand, Ham, that the 'Restless' is as good as a liner."

"Huh! It sho' ain't much bigger dan a row-boat, an' nuffin' but dem two peanut roasters to keep pushin' de propellers 'gainst monst'ous waves," snorted Ham, pulling on his shoes and standing up to fit on his white canvas coat. "Fore de Lawd, ef Ah done t'ought Ise gwineter git inter a hurricane in dis yere lobstah smack——"

"Will you quit calling our boat hard names, and get your fire started?" demanded Joe Dawson, scowling, and taking a step toward the negro.

"Yes, sah! Yes, sah!" exclaimed Ham, moving fast. But there was a wild look in his eyes, for Ham was a sea-coward if there ever was one. Though he started the galley fire, and made other moves, the steward hardly knew what he was doing.

"Er stohm comin'—a reg-lar hurricane, an'

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dis yere niggah ain' done been inside er chu'ch in a month!" Ham groaned to himself.

As Joe Dawson returned to the bridge deck he noted some increase in the haze to the southward. The wind, too, was kicking up a bit more, though as yet the sea was running so smoothly that a landlubber would never have suspected that the "Restless" was moving in the track of dire trouble to come.

"Can you take the wheel just a moment, old fellow?" requested Tom Halstead. "I don't want to bother our passengers, but, now that both ladies are on deck, I want to go below and make sure that the stateroom port-holes are tightly closed."

Mr. Tremaine was now talking to the ladies, Dixon having vanished. Tom went through the passage connecting the motor room with the cabin. As he went he stepped as softly as usual. Even in turning the handle of the door into the cabin he made no noise. And so, quite unexpectedly, the young skipper came upon Oliver Dixon.

Dixon stood at the cabin table, facing aft. In one hand he held a vial of water, or what appeared to be water. Now, he lifted a paper containing whitish crystals, all of which he emptied into the vial, corking the container and giving the mixture several shakes.

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Holding the bottle up to the light, in order to make sure that all the crystals had dissolved, Dixon happened to turn enough to see Captain Halstead.

"Confound you, boy, what are you doing there?" gasped Dixon, becoming suddenly so excited that he dropped the bottle to the soft carpet.

Tom flushed at the use of the word "boy." On his own craft he was wholly entitled to be called "captain." But he replied, steadily:

"Pardon me, Mr. Dixon, but I saw you doing something with the bottle, and I waited so that I wouldn't take the risk of jogging your elbow in passing you."

Oliver Dixon, a little pale about the mouth, and with a suspicious look in his eyes, stared at the young sailing master.

"Well, what are you doing here, anyway?"

The tone and manner were so offensive that Halstead flushed in earnest this time, though he answered, quietly enough:

"Pardon me, Mr. Dixon, but as commander and part owner, I don't have to explain my presence in any part of this craft."

"You were spying on me!" hissed the other, sharply.

Tom Halstead opened his eyes very wide.

"I might ask, Mr. Dixon, whether you are in

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the habit of doing things that would interest a spy?"

Dixon drew in his breath sharply, first flushing, then all the color leaving his face. But the young man was quick to feel that he was making matters worse.

"Don't mind me, Halstead," he begged, quickly. "You startled me, and I hardly know what I'm saying. I—I—I— am South for my nerves, you know."

"No; I didn't know," replied Skipper Tom, quietly. He felt a good deal of wonder at the statement, for Oliver Dixon looked like anything but a nervous wreck.

"You—you won't mention this?" begged the young man, bending to pick up the vial, which he thrust into a vest pocket.

"Why, I don't see anything either to tell or to conceal," remarked Captain Halstead.

"I—I don't want Miss Silsbee—or the Tremaines, either, for that matter, to know that I'm so—so nervous," almost stammered Oliver Dixon.

"I'm not in the habit of carrying tales of any kind," retorted the youthful skipper, rather stiffly.

He passed on to the staterooms at the after end of the cabin. Dixon followed him with a scowl full of suspicion and hate. Could Hal-

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stead have seen that look he would have been intensely astonished.

By the time he had attended to the stateroom portholes and had come out again, Halstead found Ham in the cabin, spreading the cloth for the evening meal. So as not to be in the steward's way, Tom went up by the after companionway. As Tom stepped to the deck the clatter of dishes came up after him.

"The steward isn't setting the dinner table so soon, is he?" asked Mrs. Tremaine, in her usual languid voice.

"Yes, madam."

"But I thought we had made it plain that we didn't want dinner served, any night, earlier than seven o'clock."

"There's a reason, to-night, Mrs. Tremaine," replied Skipper Tom, standing there, uniform cap in hand. "It is best to have the meal over early because—well, do you see the sky to the southward?"

The haze at the lower horizon had spread into a darkening cloud that was overtaking the boat.

"Are we going to have a storm?" asked Mrs. Tremaine, in quick apprehension.

"Well, a bit of a blow, anyway," admitted the young captain. "It may prove, Mrs. Tremaine, to be just a little kink out of the Gulf Stream, which we are now leaving."

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"Is it going to be one of the ugly, southerly December gales which I've read cross the Gulf of Mexico with such violence?" asked Ida Silsbee, turning around quickly.

"We'll hope it won't be much," replied Captain Tom, smiling. "You can see that I don't look very worried."

"Oh, you can't fool me, Captain Halstead," cried Mrs. Tremaine, rising from her chair with what was unusual haste for her. "You know more than you are telling! Things are going to happen to-night!"

More things, indeed, than Captain Tom Halstead yet dreamed!

Before Skipper Tom had turned to walk forward a long, rolling wave, a foretaste of the weather to come, had rolled in from the south, causing the "Restless" to take a plunge. A shorter wave followed, rocking the craft noticeably. In an instant the colored steward's head was poked up through the companionway.

Ham took a look about him at the weather, and an eerie glint flashed in his eyes.

"'Fore de Lawd, dere's goin' ter be wedder dis night!" he muttered. "Don't Ah know?"

"Ham," called Ida Silsbee, laughingly, "if it rains this evening, and keeps us below, you'll have a fine chance to tell us that story about the Ghost of Alligator Swamp."

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"On sech a night like as dis'll be?" demanded Ham Mockus, rolling his eyes. "'Scuse me, Missy Ida. Ah don't talk 'bout ghosts *on deir night!*"

"What's going to be the matter with to-night, Ham?" inquired Mrs. Tremaine, showing signs of listless interest.

"Ter-night?" repeated the colored man, slowly. "'Scuse me, Mis' Tremaine, but dis is gwine ter be der berry—'Scuse me. Ah mean, ole Satan is shuah gwine ter be in de gale ter-night!"

CHAPTER II

HAM TURNS OUT TO BE A PROPHET

"YASSUH! yassuh! Dat's de story 'bout de Ghost ob Alligator Swamp," declared Ham Mockus, solemnly.

It had been hard work to get the yarn out of the colored steward. The meal was over, and the howling of the wind through the rigging of the signal mast made a dismal sound that was enough to get on any timid person's nerves. But the electric lights were turned on brilliantly in the cozy, snug little cabin of the "Restless." All being light and warmth there, and the four passengers being in merry mood, Ham had gotten his courage together. As the two men

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lighted their cigars at the end of the meal, after having secured the permission of the ladies, Mr. Tremaine had pushed the cigar box toward the steward, intimating that Ham might remain and indulge in a cigar if he would tell them, truthfully and without holding back any part, the story of the ghost in question.

"For you know, Ham," Mr. Tremaine had explained, "I haven't been near my place in these parts for three years, and I've heard only the faintest rumors about the ghost. I want a real, true account."

So Ham, with many mutterings under his breath, with many sharp indrawings of air and much rolling of his eyes, had told the startling tale. Not all of it need be told here, as the Ghost of Alligator Swamp was destined to appear to all now on board. According to Ham Mockus the spectre could take the form of either man or woman, or even of any of the better-known beasts. Water was no barrier; it could travel at sea. Distance meant nothing to this grisly apparition, which, at need, could travel fifty miles in a second. Ham told tale after tale about the ghost. The others listened mostly in amused silence; but the narration caused the hair of Ham himself to stand on end.

"Why, then, Ham," suggested Mr. Tremaine, taking a few thoughtful whiffs of his cigar,

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"there'd be really nothing to prevent the ghost from coming on board here to-night in the midst of the storm, if we have one."

"Yassuh! yassuh! Dat ghost can done come, ef it wanter."

"I wonder if it will?" asked Miss Silsbee, musingly.

"Don' say dat, Missy! Don', fo' de lub ob hebben!" begged Ham, growing terror-stricken. "Many time dat ha'nt done go wheah it been asked ter go. Don' 'vite it heah! Ole Marse Satan, he shuah ter ride in de gale dis night, an' ole Marse Satan, he am ernuff, fo' shuah! 'Scuse me, now, ladies an' gemmen. I gotter finish clearin' offen de table."

With that, the steward began to remove dishes and other things in a hurry, his feet sounding constantly in the passage forward of the cabin. Then, at last, he appeared to inquire:

"Is dat all fo' me, now, ladies an' gemmen?"

"Yes; we shan't need you any more, Ham," replied Mrs. Tremaine.

Ordinarily, Ham would have gone to the galley, where, with hot water ready, he would have cleaned up all the dishes.

"But Ah ain't so shuah dere gwine ter *be* any mawnin'," he muttered to himself, after he had bobbed his head up into the open for a long look

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at the threatening sky overhead. So Ham came out on deck, to walk about as long as he could still find it safe to do so.

Following the early winter twilight an increasing darkness had settled down over the waters. Every few minutes Captain Tom, once more at the wheel, turned on the electric searchlight, swinging it around in an arc of a circle before the boat, seeking to inform himself of any danger that might lie in their path. For the rest, the young skipper was content to steer through the darkness, having only the binnacle light upon the compass for a guide, and carrying the chart memorized in his mind.

For the last hour the waves had been crested with white-caps. Every now and then a mass of foam leaped over the bulwarks of the bridge deck, the water retreating through the scuppers. The wind was blowing at nearly twenty-five miles an hour. Yet, so far, there was nothing in the actual weather that could make a capable captain's mind uneasy. Joe, after a look out into the black night, and after wetting his finger and holding it up in the breeze, had gone below, where he found his motors working satisfactorily. So he had turned into his bunk, hoping to catch an hour or two of sleep ere the call came for duty on deck all through the night.

The "Restless" was rolling and pitching con-

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siderably, but as yet the motion was no more than was agreeable to those who love the sea and its moods. As Ham came up on deck, however, he saw that the life-lines had been stretched. That had been Joe Dawson's last work before turning in.

"You'll want to keep awake to-night, Ham," called Tom, when he saw his dark visage.

"Yassuh! yassuh!" came willingly from the colored man, who, however, could go to sleep standing up anywhere.

Though none of the passengers below was exactly afraid, none cared to turn in early that night. After the men had smoked as much as they cared to, the quartette in the cabin started a game of euchre.

Tom, who had last been relieved at seven o'clock, in order that he might go below for supper, kept at the wheel alone, until eleven o'clock. Then, catching sight of the steward's head through the doorway of the motor room, he shouted the order to call Joe Dawson on deck.

Joe came with the promptness of a fireman responding to an alarm. He took a look about him at the weather, then faced his chum.

"Between Marquesas and Tortugas?" he asked.

"Yes. Look!"

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At just that moment the red eye of the revolving light over on Dry Tortugas, some miles away, swung around toward them.

"I'm glad the gale has held off so long," muttered Joe. "This is the nastiest part of the way. Half an hour more, if a squall doesn't strike us, and we'll be where we'll feel easier."

"It's queer weather, anyway," said Skipper Tom musingly. "I figured we'd be in the thick of a souther by eight o'clock."

"Maybe the storm has spent itself south of us," ventured Joe Dawson, but Halstead shook his head.

"No; it's going to catch us. No doubt about that. Hullo! Feel that?"

The first drops of rain struck the backs of their necks. Nodding, Dawson dived below, coming up soon in his oilskins and sou'wester. He took the wheel while Tom vanished briefly for similar clothing and headgear.

Swish-sh-sh! Now, the rain began to drive down in great sheets, illumined by two faint flashes of winter lightning. Immediately afterward came a rush of wind from the south that sang loudly through the rigging on the signal mast.

"Now, we'll soon be in for it in earnest," muttered Tom Halstead, taking the wheel from his chum and casting an anxious look for the

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next "red eye" from the revolving light over on Tortugas.

Voices sounded on the after deck. Henry Tremaine was calling to his wife and ward to get on their rain coats and come up for a brief look at the weather.

"Joe," muttered the young skipper, sharply, "go back to those people and tell them the only place for them is going to be below. Tell Mr. Tremaine he'd be endangering the ladies to have 'em on deck, even for a minute or two. Push 'em below and lock the after companion-way, if you have to!"

Joe easily made his way aft to carry out these instructions. Hardly had Dawson returned when another and greater gust of wind overtook the "Restless." Her nose was buried deep in the water, as she pitched. Then, on the crest of the following wave, the little craft's bow rose high. The full gale was upon them in five minutes more—a wind blowing fifty-five miles an hour. Running before the wind the cruiser steered easily enough. Tom could manage the wheel alone, though Joe stood by to lend a hand in case of accident or emergency.

Up onto deck stumbled Ham Mockus, clutching desperately at the deckhouse and life-lines.

"Fo' de Lawd's sake, dis shuah gwine finish us!" yelled the steward in terror. He was so

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badly frightened, in fact, that both boys felt sorry for him.

"Don't you believe it," Captain Tom bellowed at him. "We've been out in a heap sight worse gales than this."

"In dis boat?" wailed Ham, hoarsely.

"Right in this boat, in one worse gale," replied Halstead, thinking of the September northeaster experienced on the other side of Florida, as told in "THE MOTOR BOAT CLUB AND THE WIRELESS."

"But Ah reckon ole Marse Satan didn't gwine ride on dat gale," protested Ham Mockus.

"Nor on this gale, either," rasped Halstead, sharply.

"Den yo' don' know," retorted the steward, with an air of conviction. "Yo's all right, Marse Tom, but yo' ain't raised on dis west coast like Ah wuz."

"Get below," counseled Joe Dawson. "You'll drown up here, Ham."

For, by now, the decks were awash, and there was a threat that, at any moment, the great combers would be rolling fairly across the bulwarks. Dawson drove the black man below, forcing him to close the motor room hatch.

Five minutes later, however, the hatch opened again, and Oliver Dixon appeared in rain coat and cap.

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"I thought you might need an extra hand up here," volunteered Dixon, speaking in a loud voice to make himself heard over the howling gale. "So I told the ladies I'd come on deck for a while."

"No, we don't need anyone, thank you," Tom shouted back at him. "We'll soon be past Tortugas, and then we'll be in open waters for hours to come."

Yet Dixon showed no intention of returning below. Tom Halstead did not like to order him below decks. Dixon, making his way to where he could lean against the cabin deck-house, was not likely to be at all in the way.

"There's no accounting for tastes," muttered Joe, under his breath. "If I were a passenger on this boat, and had a snug cabin to go to, that would be good enough for me. I wonder why I dislike this fellow so?"

By the time that they had the Tortugas light well astern Captain Tom jerked his head slightly backward, then glanced meaningly at his chum before looking straight ahead.

"Yes; we're in the open," nodded Joe. "Good!"

Yet the gale, if anything, was increasing in severity. Staunch a craft as she was, the "Restless" creaked almost as though in agony. Timbers will act that way in any heavy sea.

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"Take the wheel, Joe!" shouted Skipper Tom, presently. "My arms ache."

And well they might, as Joe knew, for, with such a sea running, the wheel acted as though it were a thing of life as it fiercely resisted every turn.

As Dawson stepped into place, bracing himself, and with both strong young hands resting on the spokes, Tom Halstead, holding lightly to one of the life lines, started to step backward to the deck-house. Just then a great, combing wave broke over the boat, from astern, racing the full length with fearful force. Joe Dawson, hearing it come, partly turned to meet it. Halstead was caught, lurching as he let go of the life line to clutch at the deck-house. Dixon's foot shot out, tripping the young skipper. Losing his footing and deprived of grip at the same instant, Tom Halstead rose on the billow as it swept along.

Over the port side went the great mass of water. It would have carried Skipper Tom with it, all in a flash, but Joe, dropping the wheel and diving to hit the port bulwark, threw his hands upward, clutching desperately at his friend's leg.

Then Dawson held on—how he gripped!

A moment more and the force of that invading billow was spent. Joe, panting under the

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strain of that fight against tons of water in motion, drew Halstead to him in safety.

But the "Restless," with no hand at the wheel, was lurching around into the trough of the sea. The next wave might engulf her.

Sure that his friend was safe, Joe Dawson sprang to the wheel. While he was still fighting with the steering gear, Tom Halstead stood at his side. Between them, not without effort, they put the bobbing little cork of a cruiser on her course, once more, on that seething, boiling stretch of waters.

"Can you hold her, Joe?" panted Tom, huskily, in his friend's ear.

Dawson nodding, Tom stepped back to Dixon, who regarded the young captain with curiously blazing eyes.

"I think you'd better go below, sir," shouted Halstead.

"Why—why—do you mean——?"

"I mean nothing," retorted Tom, dryly, "except that the deck is no place for you in this weather. We can handle the yacht better if all passengers are below."

"But——"

Captain Tom's eyes gleamed resolutely.

"Will you go below, sir, or shall I have to call the steward to help me put you below? I mean it, Mr. Dixon. I'm captain here!"

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Gripping at the lines, Dixon sullenly made his way to the motor room hatch. Halstead swung it open, gently but firmly aiding his passenger below.

"Did he trip you?" asked Joe, when the hatch had been closed and his chum stood beside him.

"It's an awful thing to say, and I guess he didn't, but I almost thought so," Halstead shouted back.

"He's bad, I think," growled Joe, which was a good deal for that quiet young engineer to say. "Yet I can't see any earthly reason for his treating you like that."

"Nor I, either," admitted the youthful sailing master. "Oh, of course he didn't mean to. The whole thing is too absurd!"

Ten minutes later, feeling that it would be better to go below and see how the hull was standing the severe strain, Halstead called to Ham to stand by Joe on deck. Then Tom went below.

Once down there, it struck him to step through the passageway. There was a peephole slide in the door opening into the cabin. Halstead stood there, shifting the slide so that he could look beyond.

"If the ladies are still up," he told himself, "I can see how they are bearing the excitement.

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If they look very scared, I'll go in and try to put some courage into them."

As Halstead looked through the small peephole, he saw Tremaine and that gentleman's wife and ward seated at the further end of the cabin table, bending over a book that Tremaine held open. At the sideboard stood young Dixon.

"Now, what's he doing?" wondered Halstead, curiously.

With the water bottle in one hand, Oliver Dixon was pouring into it a few drops from the vial he had placed in his vest pocket in the late afternoon.

In the meantime, up on the bridge deck, Joe Dawson at first waited for the return of his chum without any feeling of curiosity. Yet, after many minutes had passed the young fleet engineer of the Motor Boat Club began to wonder what his comrade was doing below.

"Ham," ordered Joe, at last, "go below and find Captain Halstead. See if anything has happened."

Glad enough to get away from the deck, where the billows were pouring over and threatening to carry him overboard, the colored steward made his way, clutching at the life-lines, to the motor room door.

"Get that hatch shut!" roared Joe. "Don't

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leave it open for a five-ton wave to get down in there at the motors!"

Ham shut the hatch with a bang, then ran through the passageway to the cabin door.

"'Scuse me, ladies an' gemmen," begged Ham, poking his head through the doorway. "Any ob yo' done seen Cap'n Halstead?"

"Why, no," replied Mr. Tremaine, looking up. "He hasn't been through this cabin—at least, not within the last hour. Isn't he on deck?"

"No, sah. Marse Dawson, he-um up at de wheel. He gwine sent me heah to look fo' de cap'n."

"You were forward, a while ago, Dixon," spoke Mr. Tremaine. "Did you see Halstead?"

"Not even a glimpse of him," replied that young man.

"Is the captain lost?" demanded Mrs. Tremaine, a tremor in her tone.

"I'se spec he must be," declared Ham, solemnly. "He-um ain' forrard, an' he-um ain' on de bridge. He-um ain' here, neider."

"Don't alarm the ladies, Ham," spoke Mr. Tremaine, sharply. "If Captain Halstead came below, then of course he didn't go overboard. Look forward. If you don't find the captain promptly, come back for me, and I'll help you."

Ham departed, going back through the

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passageway. Then, emitting a frenzied yell, shaking in every limb, Ham half lurched, half tottered back into the cabin. His appearance of utter fright was such as to cause the ladies to rise, holding to the table for support while the boat rocked and dipped.

As for Ham, he fell against the sideboard, holding on there, his eyes rolling wildly, until little more than the scared whites of them could be seen.

"What do you mean, you black idiot?" roared Mr. Tremaine, darting at the steward and clutching him, administering a sound shaking.

"Cap'n Halstead, he ain' on board!" wailed Ham Mockus. Then, in a greater outburst of terror, he screamed hoarsely:

"Dat ain' de worst! De Ghost ob Alligator Swamp *am* on board—Ah done seen it so close dat Ah s'pec it reach out an' grab me!"

Though none of the passengers believed in ghosts, this information, at such a time, was enough to make them gasp.

"W'ut Ah done tell yo'?" roared Ham, his voice deepening in the frenzy of his terror. "Ah tole yo'-all dat ole Marse Satan gwine ride on dis great wind ternight! He sho' is doin' dat. Oh, Lawdy!"

Slipping from the grasp of Henry Tremaine, Ham Mockus sank groveling to the floor.

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CHAPTER III

THE MYSTERY OF THE NIGHT

"COME, get up, you imp!" roared Mr. Tremaine, angrily, as he bent over. He seized the steward by the collar, and dragged that frightened individual to his feet.

"Ham, you simpleton, there's no such thing as a ghost," uttered Mr. Tremaine, sharply.

"Oh, ain' dere, den?" demanded Ham, in high disgust at such ignorance. "Yo' go out an' meet it, den!"

"I will," agreed Henry Tremaine, gripping the negro tightly by the arm. "Where did you see that ghost?"

"In de passageway, sah."

"Then come along and show it to me."

Mr. Tremaine spoke with such an air of disbelief and firmness that Ham Mockus began to gather some courage from such leadership.

"But, den, sah, mebbe dat ghos' don' show himself to white folks ob de quality kind," suggested the steward.

"If we don't see the ghost, then you've all the less reason to be afraid," retorted Henry Tremaine. "But come along and see whether you can show the ghost to me."

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As Tremaine marched the badly scared steward out into the passageway, the ladies started to follow, out of sheer curiosity. So badly was the yacht rolling that Dixon went with them, to steady them and save them from being pitched headlong.

"It was right erlong in dis passageway, sah," Ham offered solemn assurance. "An' Ah done heard a feahful sound—o-o-o-oh!"

Ham suddenly gave a bound that took him out of Tremaine's clutch. He darted to the forward end of the passageway, then halted, crouching, his eyes rolling almost as fast as the propeller shafts could revolve.

Unquestionably there *had* been a sound. Henry Tremaine, far from superstitious, thought he had heard the same sound. As he halted, rooted to the spot, he heard a distinct knocking.

"There's something at the other side of this closet door," spoke Tremaine, with a positive air. Reaching out, he drew out the hook by which the door was secured in place. As he pulled the door open, Tom Halstead, looking more than half dead, lurched out of the little compartment in which he had been a prisoner. Tremaine caught him and steadied him.

"What's the matter, lad?" demanded the charter-man.

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"Air," whispered Halstead, hoarsely. "Nearly died in there!"

"Your fans—quick, ladies," cried Mr. Tremaine.

Out where the ventilators were working, the youthful sailing master was quickly revived. Then Mr. Tremaine led him back to the cabin, and dropped him into a seat, while the ladies plied their fans vigorously.

"Oh, I guess I'm all right, now," protested Skipper Tom, looking up with a smile.

"But how came you in that place?" questioned Mr. Tremaine.

"Why, one of our air compartments is in that place," muttered Tom. "I stepped in there, just to make sure that all was right. While I was there the yacht lurched and the door slammed to. The hook on the outside must have been standing up. Then it dropped, fitting just into place. I made an awful racket, hoping to attract someone's attention. Then I began to get dizzy for lack of air."

"That was what that idiot, Ham, thought was the noise the ghost made," grimaced Mr. Tremaine. "But, good heavens, Halstead! What a fearful accident to have happened. And, here in the cabin, we couldn't hear your clatter on this night of all nights."

"Joe could have brought you through, I guess,

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sir," Tom smiled. "Yet I'm glad I didn't smother in there to-night. It's much safer, in a gale like this, to have two men on the bridge deck. I'm going back there now."

"Are you steady enough?" asked Mrs. Tremaine.

"Oh, I'm all right," vaunted Halstead. "I'll go up on deck, now, and feel better for the air."

Mr. Tremaine insisted on going forward with him as far as the motor room hatch, seeing the young skipper safe out on deck. Then the charter-man turned upon Ham, whose eyes were rolling at a more furious rate than ever, and dragged him back to the cabin.

"Ham, you infernal scared-cat!" roared Tremaine, as he stood the steward up by the sideboard. Then the charter-man explained what really had happened.

"Yet you said you saw a ghost!" finished Mr. Tremaine.

"Ah done t'ought Ah did, we'en Ah heahed dat awful noise," chattered Ham Mockus.

Tom Halstead's condition rapidly improved as he groped his way to Joe's side on the bridge deck, and stood gulping in great draughts of the air that was blowing so forcefully about him. Next, he shouted, in his chum's ear, an account of what had happened to him.

"Mighty curious," Joe bawled back, with a

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shake of his head. "About one chance in a million, I should say, that the door could close and hook itself."

"How else could it have happened?" Halstead demanded.

At that, Joe had to admit that he had no theory of his own to fit the case. While they were still talking about it, Henry Tremaine, in rain-coat and visored cap, opened the hatch, and came out onto the deck.

"Keep hold of the life-ropes, sir," Tom yelled at him. "Look out for this wave coming!"

Such a great weight of water rolled in over the low stern, flooding swiftly forward, that the "Restless" went low in the sea ere the salty ebb went out through the running scuppers.

"The weather's growing stiffer, isn't it?" demanded Mr. Tremaine, after the deluge had passed.

"Not growing any better, sir, anyway."

"I've just told the ladies the weather is moderating a good deal," Tremaine went on, talking at the top of his voice, in order to make himself heard. "They haven't lost their courage yet, and there's no sense in their being allowed to get scared. They won't turn in, though. Say they'd rather sit up until the boat pitches a good deal less. Do you consider that there's any real danger to-night, Captain?"

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"Yes," admitted Tom, honestly.

"What is it?"

"Why, the 'Restless,' I believe, sir, is fully staunch enough to weather such a gale if she can be kept going ahead. Yet the force of the rolling water to-night is something terrific. If our propeller shafts snapped, under the strain, and we drifted in the trough of the sea, I don't know how long we *could* keep afloat."

"That's the only danger?" asked Henry Tremaine, eyeing the young sailing master keenly.

"That's the greatest danger, sir."

"What are the others?"

"Why, sir, some of the hull timbers might be forced so that a leak would be sprung, or, of course, we might go onto some uncharted reef or rock. This is a mean bit of coast to sail on with no local pilot aboard."

"You're not afraid of disaster, are you, Captain Halstead?"

Tom's smile was swift and reassuring.

"I expect, sir, to land you at some point in Oyster Bay by breakfast time," answered the young commander.

For some moments Henry Tremaine studied the clean, clear-cut face and steady, resolute eyes of Captain Tom. Then he glanced at the sturdy, unflinching figure of Joe Dawson at the wheel.

"Halstead," the charter-man shouted back,

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"since I have to be out here on rough waters, and in the big blow, I am glad I'm with you two. I couldn't be in braver hands. When I *do* turn in to-night it will be to sleep soundly."

How true the latter part of his prediction would come Tremaine could not guess as he groped his way down below.

This night of hurricane *was* full of dangers, even though the propeller shafts should hold and the motors continue to work under the strain. A score of times, at least, each of the young navigators had to fight the grave danger of being lifted and carried overboard on the curling crest of one of the many huge, combing waves that piled over the stern of the "Restless" and dashed thunderously along the low deck of the yacht.

Every now and then, while Tom was at the wheel, Joe went below to look over his motors. Once he found them becoming overheated. It was necessary to slow the speed down to seven miles, and at this lessened gait the boat rolled more than ever. Yet Joe had to fight it out with the motors, even though headway was lost.

When, at last, late in the night, the speed had been put up to nine miles, Joe came up on deck and Skipper Tom went briefly below. He found all his passengers still up in the cabin.

"I just came below," smiled Captain Hal-

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stead, "to assure you all that it will be wholly safe for you to turn in, if you wish. I wouldn't say that if I didn't believe it. Mr. Tremaine, we've had to slacken the speed for quite a while, to cool our engines, so we won't make Oyster Bay as early as I had expected."

The ladies, who could hardly hold their eyes open, expressed a desire for sleep. Tremaine and young Dixon assisted them as far as their stateroom door, then came back.

"I believe I'll turn in, Tremaine," yawned Oliver Dixon, just as Tom Halstead, in his sou'-wester and oilskins, depárted. "Are you going to do the same?"

"After my bed-time glass of water, yes," nodded the charter-man, groping his way to the sideboard and reaching for the water-bottle.

Ham, still wholly of the opinion that he had seen a ghost, had long ago crept into his bunk in the motor room, covering up his head. He had fallen asleep. Muffled snores from that berth greeted the young skipper as he reached the motor room.

"That reminds me," muttered Halstead. "I forgot to lock the cabin door into the passage-way."

Retracing his steps, he used his key. This he had done regularly on the cruise so that Ham Mockus, a stranger to all on board, could not, if

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so tempted, prowl in the cabin after the others had retired. Then Halstead returned to deck.

Through the long night he and Joe, strong and fearless as they were, wrestled with exhaustion, for the physical strain was enormous. They met the duties of the night as only Americans, born on the sea-coast and bred to the salt water ways, can meet such problems. There were times when they believed the pounding seas *must* snap one of the propeller shafts. With one shaft gone, the other shaft could not long have done double duty on such a night and in such a sea.

At last Captain Tom sternly ordered Joe Dawson below for a rest. Joe came up on deck again, after a nap of an hour and a half, when it was within an hour of daylight.

"Now, you get below," begged Dawson. "I feel as strong as a horse, Tom. And go back to your berth in the cabin, at that. You know, I have the electric signal to your berth, if I need you."

Captain Tom stood for some time, regarding the weather and the running sea. But it seemed to him that they had reached a point where the gale was much less severe, and he was aching in every muscle and sinew.

"I'll go below for a little while," he assented. Stopping in the motor room long enough to

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shed oilskins and headgear, and hearing Ham still snoring luxuriously, the young sailing master trod through the passageway, unlocking the cabin door, then locking it again after him.

Captain Tom drifted off into slumber the instant his head touched the pillow in his berth. Nor did he waken. Joe, glad that his chum might rest at last, fought it out all alone on the bridge deck. Daylight was flooding the cabin from the transom overhead when Captain Halstead was roused by hearing Mrs. Tremaine's voice. Poking his head sleepily through the berth curtains, Tom beheld both ladies fully dressed, while Oliver Dixon was just coming out from the other stateroom.

"We're riding in much easier water, now, ladies," was Dixon's greeting.

"Yes; I noticed that," replied Ida Silsbee. "And I can't tell you how glad I am, either. I tried to be brave last night, but I'll admit I was worried. I'd have been more alarmed, only I realized what a splendid pair of young sailors were looking after——Why, there's Captain Halstead, drinking in enough flattery to turn his head," laughed the girl, catching sight of the young skipper.

"Is Mr. Tremaine rising?" inquired Mrs. Tremaine.

"No; sleeping like a log," replied Dixon.

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"Then I'll go in and arouse him," declared Mrs. Tremaine. "I noticed from the stateroom port that we are running rather close to shore. We must be near the end of our present voyage."

Mrs. Tremaine disappeared into the starboard stateroom, but presently looked out again, bewilderment expressed on her face.

"I can't guess what's the matter with Henry," she confessed. "I've called to him, and shaken him, but he doesn't answer me. He's breathing so heavily that I—I'm alarmed."

By this time Captain Tom Halstead was presentable enough to join the others. After greeting the three, he followed Mrs. Tremaine and Dixon to the starboard stateroom.

Henry Tremaine surely was breathing heavily —almost with a rattle, in fact. But Tom, pressing past the others, succeeded in making the charter-man open his eyes.

"All right," he muttered, as though still in a daze. "I'll get up, right away."

"I'll stay and help you dress," proposed Tom, upon which the other two retreated.

"Gracious! How my head feels!" groaned Tremaine, as he got unsteadily onto his feet. Tom had to clutch at him and hold him.

"I feel as though I had been drugged," muttered Tremaine, slowly. "I—I can't half think, and my head aches, and is so dizzy——"

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"You'll want to get in the air, then," proposed the young skipper, as Tremaine finished getting on the last of his clothes.

"Where—are we?"

"Why, since Mrs. Tremaine saw land from the port stateroom, I think we must at least be in the mouth of Oyster Bay, sir."

"Then, if we're going to land so soon," proposed Henry Tremaine, "I may as well get my money out. Halstead, be a good fellow. I feel so bad that I don't dare bend over. Here are my steamer trunk keys. Open the trunk and lift out the small iron box you'll find there. I have ten thousand dollars in bills there. I'll deposit the money on shore."

Halstead readily found the iron box, and placed it on the edge of the berth. Tremaine, still groaning about his head, fitted a key into the box, and raised the strong lid.

"What's this?" Tremaine almost yelled, as soon as he had the iron box opened.

Tom Halstead looked, then gasped.

"Why, there's not a dollar—not a sou—in this box!" roared Henry Tremaine. "Yesterday, there was ten thousand dollars in it!"

His excited exclamations brought the other passengers to the doorway.

"What's the matter, my dear?" inquired Mrs. Tremaine.

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"Why," exclaimed her husband, bewilderedly, "I appear to be out ten thousand dollars. The money was in this box yesterday afternoon."

"Robbed?" gasped Mrs. Tremaine.

"So it would seem," retorted her husband, dryly. "And—Jupiter! From the way my head feels, I've been drugged, too! Of course the thief had to drug me, in order to be sure that I wouldn't wake up when he came in during the night."

"Who has had access to this cabin while we slept?" demanded Oliver Dixon. "That negro —Ham?"

"No," rejoined Tom Halstead, promptly. "Ham has been asleep in his berth. I locked the door into the cabin. I'm the only one who had access here."

"Do you know anyhing about where the money went to, Halstead?" inquired Mr. Tremaine, looking up at him.

"I?" stammered the young sailing master of the "Restless." "Certainly not, sir!"

"Then who does?" demanded Oliver Dixon, shooting a suspicious look at the young captain.

As Tom Halstead glanced swiftly from one face to another, something of the awful meaning of the situation flashed over him.

"See here," he muttered, hoarsely, "I hope none of you think *I* could do anything like this!

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I? Rob my own passengers? Why, it would settle my fate as a yacht commander all in an instant! No, no! You surely must all see that I simply *couldn't* have done a thing like this!"

CHAPTER IV

"BOAT-CALL FOR THE POLICE"

"WE'D certainly hate to believe anything of the sort," said Oliver Dixon, slowly, in a half-purring tone, though reluctant suspicion sounded in his voice.

"I wouldn't believe *that*—not if anyone swore himself as an eye-witness," declared Ida Silsbee, promptly.

Skipper Tom thanked her with a swift, eloquent glance.

"It *would* seem absurd," declared Mrs. Tremaine, though there was the briefest touch of hesitation in her tone.

"Confound my buzzing head! I don't know what to say yet," grumbled Henry Tremaine.

"I want this matter investigated to the very bottom," protested Halstead, his voice shaking as no terror of the hurricane could have made it shake.

"Oh, well, the money must be somewhere on board, unless the one who took it threw it into

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the sea," replied Henry Tremaine, pulling himself to his feet.

"And we won't let anyone off this yacht, either, until the search has been made to the very end," declared Tom Halstead. "Everybody and every nook and corner must stand search."

"For that matter," smiled Oliver Dixon, dully, "there must be countless little nooks and crannies on this boat where anyone knowing the craft could tuck away a small bundle of banknotes."

"I'll show every nook and cranny I know," retorted Tom, turning almost fiercely on Dixon. "So will Joe Dawson. And, to prove our good faith, we'll let the police authorities bring on board as many men as they like whose knowledge will fit them to search a craft like this."

"Captain Halstead," asked Ida Silsbee, stepping forward, speaking very softly, while her cheeks glowed, "will you take my hand?"

In sheer gratitude Captain Tom seized the dainty hand offered him, pressing it hard, while Oliver Dixon looked on, green-eyed with jealousy.

"Won't you let me offer my hand, too, Captain Halstead?" asked Mrs. Tremaine.

Tom grasped hers, in turn.

"Oh, hang it all," cried Henry Tremaine,

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"ten thousand dollars isn't all the money in the world. It isn't all the money in *my* little world, either. This will all come out all right. I want to be a decent fellow, and I would be, too, if this raging head of mine would only let me."

"I'll help you to a seat, dear, and bathe your head," suggested Mrs. Tremaine, to which suggestion her husband assented.

"I must go on deck, now—simply *must*," announced Halstead. "Yet I'd feel better about it if one of you could come up with me—just to see that I don't dispose of the money, you know," he added, with a wan attempt at a smile.

"I'm not needed here; I'll go with you, Captain," spoke up Ida Silsbee.

"No, no, no!" protested Dixon, almost hoarsely, as he pressed forward. "*I* will go."

"By all means, Mr. Dixon, if you wish," replied Ida Silsbee, flashing a curious look at him. "But I'm going with Captain Halstead, anyway, and I think you might better remain here, to be of possible service to Mrs. Tremaine."

"But—but you'll be in danger on deck," objected Dixon.

"I doubt it," retorted Ida Silsbee, with a toss of her head. "But even so, I shall be in the care of two whose bravery I have been made to respect."

"As you will, then," replied Dixon, in what

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he meant to be a coaxing voice. Yet his scowling look followed Tom Halstead.

"It was tremendously good of you——" murmured the young skipper, as the two walked through the passageway.

"What? To believe you honest?" inquired the girl. "I can't believe that young men as cool and brave, and as unmindful of fatigue, as you two have been through the night can be anything but staunch and honest."

"Thank you. Now, wait a moment, please, until I call out to Ham to pull his berth curtains before you pass through the motor room," urged Halstead.

It took him a minute or so to rouse Ham Mockus and make that steward comprehend. Then the young skipper led the girl into the motor room.

"It'll be pretty wet on deck, even yet," hinted the lad, pausing in the motor room. "Here's an oilskin coat. You had better slip it on."

After helping her into the enveloping garment, Halstead assisted her to step onto the bridge deck.

"Better get a tight hold on the life-lines, Miss Silsbee," he urged.

Joe Dawson, dog tired, was glad none the less, that his chum had been able to snatch some rest. Joe nodded brightly to both, then the sight of

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the young captain's drawn face caught the young engineer's attention.

"What on earth is the matter, Tom?" he demanded.

"During the night ten thousand dollars belonging to Mr. Tremaine has disappeared."

"No!" exploded Joe, incredulously.

"It seems to be a fact, though," Tom nodded, dully. "Let me have the wheel. Then stand by and I'll tell you about it."

The "Restless" was, as Halstead had supposed, now running in at the mouth of Oyster Bay. Though the water was rough, here at the mouth, it was noticeably smoother than it had been out on the Gulf. A good deal of spray dashed over the bow and rail from starboard. It was broad daylight, though a gray, drizzly morning. The low, sandy coast, with scant forestry, looked uninviting enough in the dull light.

As for Skipper Tom, he took only a long enough look at his surroundings to make out where he was. Then he plunged into his story, while Miss Silsbee walked down by the cabin deck-house.

"Naturally, perhaps," Tom finished, "there's almost a suspicion that I got the money."

"You?" gasped Joe, thunderstruck. All his belief in his comrade was expressed in the ex-

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plosive, unbelieving way that he uttered that single syllable, "you."

"Of course I haven't touched the money," Tom pursued, dully, as he threw the wheel over to avoid the worst force of an onrolling big wave. "But yet you can't blame Mr. Tremaine, if he wonders, can you?"

"I blame him for poor judgment of human nature, anyway!" vented Joe Dawson, hotly.

"Bravo, Mr. Dawson!" applauded Ida Silsbee, and Joe turned to acknowledge this championship with a graceful bow.

"When we reach anchor, presently," Tom went on, doggedly, "I'm going to sound the whistle for the police, and I mean to have every man on board searched from top to toe. That failing, we'll search every corner of the boat itself."

"Oh, you and I can stand a search, all right," declared Joe, cheerily, only to add, glumly:

"But to think that such a thing as that could happen aboard the 'Restless'! I tell you, I——"

He had been about to declare his suspicion of Oliver Dixon, whom he had disliked almost from the first, when Joe suddenly recollected Miss Silsbee's presence. Dixon was paying court to this girl, and Dawson wanted to play fairly.

Through Halstead's mind, however, the same suspicion of the young man was running. For

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now the young skipper remembered the vial in which he had seen Dixon dissolving something. Captain Halstead also remembered having, through the peep-hole, seen Dixon pour some of the contents of the vial into the water bottle on the sideboard.

"And Mr. Tremaine is the only one of the passengers who takes a glass of water the last thing before turning in," flashed through the youthful skipper's mind.

The hatchway opened to admit another arrival on deck. This time it was Dixon, who had only awaited his opportunity to gain the deck before Ida Silsbee could prevent.

"You came on deck, anyway," was the girl's rather chilly greeting. Joe having fallen back from the wheel, Miss Silsbee stepped up beside the youthfull skipper, as though determined to give Dixon no chance for her society. Joe Dawson was quick to follow this up by saying:

"Mr. Dixon, if you've the time to spare, I'd like to have you walk aft with me. I've one or two things I'm burning to ask."

"Well?" demanded the young man, as they reached the after deck.

"How did Captain Halstead happen to get locked in with the air compartment last night?"

"How do I know?" muttered the young man, paling slightly.

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"Don't you?"

"Of course not."

"Do *you* suspect any of our crew of taking Mr. Tremaine's money?" persisted Joe.

"Why, that would be a fearful thing to say."

"Don't you care to answer me?"

"I don't care to discuss the matter at all."

"Very good, sir," returned Dawson, curtly. "That is all."

Turning on his heel, he left Dixon, the latter feeling queerly uncomfortable, for, all the time they were talking together, Joe had kept his own eyes turned keenly on Dixon's.

Miss Silsbee kept so close to Tom that Dixon, when he finally came forward once more, soon made an excuse to go below.

"Have you ever seen the town of Tres Arbores?" queried Halstead, something like three-quarters of an hour later.

"Never," replied Ida Silsbee.

"Unless my chart lies, that's Tres Arbores off the starboard bow," Halstead continued.

"Is that where Mr. Tremaine wants you to dock?"

"It's the present end of the voyage. We can't dock, though, as there is no dock there. We'll have to anchor and row ashore to the little landing stage."

Joe, five minutes later, routed Ham up from

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below. That young colored man came up rubbing his eyes, but he looked mightily pleased when he caught sight of the nearby shore.

"Ah reckon ole Satan didn' ride dat gale all de way," he grinned. "We'se done reach poht all right."

Joe, with the sounding lead, kept track of the depths here. Tom ran the "Restless" in to within a quarter of a mile of the landing stage, then shut off speed, drifting under decreasing headway for some distance ere he gave the word for Joe and Ham to heave the anchor.

Then, all at once, the whistle shrilled out, in a succession of long blasts.

"What's that for?" asked Miss Silsbee, curiously, when the din had stopped.

"Boat-call for the police," replied Tom Halstead, reddening not a little.

CHAPTER V

TOM HAS SOME OF HIS OWN WAY

"OH, what a pity!" cried the girl, in a voice of genuine distress. "I'm almost certain Mr. Tremaine won't like that."

"It is a matter with which Mr. Tremaine has very little to do," replied the youthful skipper

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of the "Restless." "A robbery has been committed on the boat I command, and it's my duty, as well as my own desire, to have the police come aboard."

On shore, in the sleepy-looking little town, nearly a dozen people of varying ages were visible from the boat. All of these had turned waterward when the whistle sounded so long and shrilly.

"Likely as not the police force has taken a small boy with him and gone fishing somewhere," observed Halstead, dryly, as he reached once more to sound the whistle.

The Tremaines and Dixon had come up on deck through the after cabin hatch, and now stood looking curiously ashore.

As the second series of long whistles woke the echoes of this little Florida town, a negro was seen to amble down to the shore, step into a boat and push off. He rowed until within hailing distance, when he called:

"W'ut you-uns gwinter want—provisions or gas-oil?"

"We've been sounding the police call," Tom shouted back. "Send a policeman on board."

"Good Lawd!" ejaculated the black man at the oars. But he put about, beached his boat and vanished up the street. Presently he came back, followed by a drowsy-looking white man,

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not in uniform. After he had gotten his passenger aboard, the negro rowed more lustily than he had previously done, and soon ranged up alongside the "Restless."

"Ladies and gentlemen," sang out the white man, "this amiable black Ananias tells me you want a police officer."

"*I* do," replied Halstead. "I am captain of this yacht——"

"*You?*" returned the Tres Arbores officer, staring hard.

"I am captain of this yacht," Tom nodded, "and there has been a disappearance of money on board. I shall be much obliged, as will most of the others, if you'll come on board and search all the men. Afterwards, if necessary, the boat."

"I reckon, I'll have to understand this," responded the lone policeman, as the negro in the small boat held out an oar which Ham seized, then drew the rowboat in close. As the officer stepped up onto the deck of the "Restless," he threw back his coat, displaying a police star beneath.

"I am the one who lost the money," explained Henry Tremaine, stepping forward and introducing himself. "I don't want to subject anyone, especially this young captain and engineer, to any search. I'd sooner lose the money than

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bring upon any innocent person such a humiliation."

"It won't be any humiliation to me to be searched, when I know I didn't take the money," rejoined Tom Halstead, hotly. "Officer, I want the search made, and I'll submit to it first."

"But I object," broke in Mr. Tremaine. "I don't want anybody searched."

"I reckon p'raps you-all had better explain this to me," requested the policeman, who gave his name as Randolph.

Henry Tremaine told the story quickly.

"Why, sir," replied Officer Randolph, "if you, Mr. Tremaine, refuse to make any complaint, I don't see that I can do a thing."

"But a crime has been committed," insisted Halstead.

"It was committed outside this township, then," responded Randolph. "And, since Mr. Tremaine refuses to press the matter, I might lay myself liable if I were to search anyone."

"Why do you object, Mr. Tremaine?" appealed Tom, turning to the charter-man.

"Because," replied that gentleman, "it's all a puzzle to me, as it must be to the rest of us. I am satisfied that, somehow, the whole matter will be cleared up, presently, without recourse to the law."

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"But I want my boat and ourselves cleared," protested the young skipper, looking more than ever worried.

"You and your boat will be cleared—somehow—not long from now," replied Henry Tremaine, shortly. "I decline to be mixed up in any legal proceedings."

"But Ah reckon Ah's gotter hab de officer look me ober," declared Ham Mockus, coming up from below, ready to go ashore, and carrying a most dilapidated valise. "You-all will see each other again, you-all, but I'se gwine ashoah, an' likely yo'll nebber see me again. So I asks de officer kindly to look mah bag frou, an' den come below an' look me ober. Ah don' want to have you-all t'ink, bimeby, mebbe yo'd better had Ham Mockus looked ober."

"Well, open your baggage, then," grinned the police officer. "I'll accommodate you, Mockus."

Ham's meagre baggage, on exploration, proved innocent enough. Then the officer took him below to the engine-room, soon coming back to the deck with the young colored man.

"*He* hasn't much money about him," reported Mr. Randolph.

"He'll have a little more money now, though —his wages for the cruise," replied Captain Tom, handing the black man an envelope.

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"But Ah didn' bargain fo' no wages," gasped Ham, in surprise. "Ah said Ah'd work fo' passage."

"Anyone who works for us gets paid for it," rejoined Halstead, laconically.

Plainly enough Ham was overjoyed at this. His teeth showed in the grin that he gave, while he protested his thanks.

While Mr. Tremaine was bargaining with the negro boatman to put them ashore, Ida Silsbee moved over to Tom's side.

"I know, Captain Halstead," she whispered, "that you feel disappointed over not having a search made. But believe me, Mr. Tremaine does not understand how you feel. He doesn't for a moment suspect, now, that you or Mr. Dawson took the money, and he knows Ham hasn't it. Mr. Tremaine has his own notions of sensitiveness, and he prefers to drop the whole matter. He has been drugged. There isn't a doubt about that, and his head is still bothering him so that he isn't able to think clearly. Having made up his mind as best he can, however, he won't change it."

"It'll be all right," replied Tom, moodily, in a low voice. "I'll have the thing settled myself."

"This man is going to take us ashore," broke in Mr. Tremaine, from several feet away. "Then

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he'll come back for the baggage. Captain, you and Mr. Dawson will join us ashore at breakfast, won't you?"

"One of us will," Halstead made answer. "The other must remain aboard the yacht to look out for it."

Ham went over the side with the late passengers, Officer Randolph remaining behind at Tom Halstead's almost whispered request.

By the time that the boat put out from shore again the two boys and the Tres Arbores policeman were just coming up from below.

"Since they want one of us ashore, Tom," urged Dawson, "you'd better be the one to go."

"Why don't you get on land and stretch your legs?" Halstead inquired.

"Humph!" grunted Dawson. "I don't believe it would be safe for me to sit at table with that fellow Dixon. I'd feel a violent impulse, all the time, to put my closed hand against his face."

"Not in the presence of ladies?" smiled Skipper Tom.

"It would be quite easy to decoy the fellow outside. Especially," Joe added, in a whisper, "after what you told me about that vial Dixon had, and his dropping some stuff in the water decanter. Why didn't you, or why don't you, tell Mr. Tremaine about that?"

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"He'd be likely to suspect I was trying to throw suspicion on his guest to keep it off myself," Halstead replied, shaking his head.

While this was being said, Officer Randolph, who had walked astern, was out of hearing. While they were below Tom had found chance to tell his chum, in whispers, about the incidents of the vial and the water bottle. They had even investigated the water bottle on the sideboard, but had found it empty.

So it was Captain Tom who, on the third and belated trip of the boat, went ashore. Randolph went with him, even accompanying the young sailing master to the little hotel of which Tres Arbores boasted.

In the parlor they found the passengers of the "Restless" awaiting the summons to breakfast.

"You'll join us, Mr. Randolph, of course," pressed Mr. Tremaine.

"Thank you; I shall be happy to sit down and drink coffee with you," replied the Southerner.

At that moment the proprietor entered, calling them to breakfast in the next room. As the proprietor seated them, Dixon was on one side of the table, with the Tremaines, Ida Silsbee being on the opposite side, between Randolph and the young motor boat captain.

As soon as the waiter had left them, Tom

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looked across at Mr. Tremaine, eyeing him steadily.

"I am sorry, sir," remarked Tom, "to bring up this morning's affair again. Yet I feel it due to myself to say that I have succeeded in my purpose of having Dawson, myself and the 'Restless' searched."

"You have?" demanded Henry Tremaine, looking surprised though not altogether displeased.

"Yes, sir," Randolph took the matter up. "As Captain Halstead insisted, after you had gone ashore I searched both young men, their baggage, their wardrobe lockers—every place and spot aboard—even to the gasoline tanks, sir. I found no trace of the money."

As Tom Halstead's glance swept the opposite side of the table he encountered the covert, sneering look of Oliver Dixon.

"Confound the fellow!" muttered young Halstead, under his breath. "I can sympathize with Joe's desire to hit him!"

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CHAPTER VI

THE ISLAND WHERE THERE WERE NO ALLIGATORS

IT was four days later.

Late the previous afternoon the party, traveling in two wagons, had reached Henry Tremaine's Florida place at the head of Lake Okeechobee, an inland body of water, forty miles long and thirty broad, which lay at the northern extremity of the famous Florida Everglades.

The Everglades is a name given to a broad section of country whose duplicate cannot be found elsewhere in the world. It is a huge swamp district, dotted thickly with islands ranging in size from half an acre to islands many hundreds of acres in extent.

The Indians called this the "Grass Water" country. In the summer, or rainy season, the Everglades are practically impassable.

In some parts of the Everglades the water does not, in the dry, or winter season, exceed a foot in depth. In other places the water has a depth of six feet or more.

Yet, in this section, on the islands, some excellent crops may be raised, so that the country is by no means a hopeless waste. But the inhabi-

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tants have some things to dread. Rattlers and other poisonous snakes are frequently encountered in the Everglades. Watchfulness must be constantly exercised.

Curiously enough, many Northerners resort to the Everglades in winter. This is on account of the alligator shooting to be found there. In former years Henry Tremaine had done much alligator shooting in this section, having bought for a mere song a roomy, old-fashioned house that stood in the midst of considerable grounds at the head of Lake Okeechobee.

The December day being warm, Tremaine, his wife and ward and Dixon were out on the porch. At a little distance away sat Tom Halstead, absorbed in a book that he had brought along. Out on the porch at this moment, bringing a pitcher of lemonade and glasses on a tray, bustled Ham Mockus. For inquiry ashore had brought out the information that Ham bore an excellent reputation; he had, therefore, been brought along as cook and general servant to this brief alligator hunting expedition.

Two or three hundred yards below the house a pier ran some fifty feet out into the lake. At the end of the pier was a high-hulled twenty-foot gasoline launch—a boat capable of carrying fifteen passengers at a pinch. Just now Joe was alone in the little craft, overhauling the engine.

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"Why didn't you help your friend?" asked Mrs. Tremaine, looking over with a friendly smile.

"I offered to," grimaced Halstead. "But Joe smiled in his dry way and told me he didn't believe I knew much about motor boats."

"That must have made you feel quarrelsome," laughed Ida Silsbee.

"Oh, not exactly," grinned Captain Tom. "I suppose I do know, in a general way, how a gasoline motor is put together, and how to run one, if I have to. But when it comes to motors I'm certainly not in Joe Dawson's class. He's a wonder when it comes to machinery."

"But Dawson says," interjected young Dixon, "that, when it comes to handling a boat anywhere and in any sort of weather, your equal is hard to find. You two appear to form a mutual admiration society."

Though this was said with a laugh, and in a tone at which no offense could reasonably be taken, Tom Halstead nevertheless flushed. He had grown to look for slighting remarks from this young man.

"Oh, if it is a matter of believing that Captain Halstead and his friend are the brightest young men of their kind, I'll subscribe," ventured Ida Silsbee, promptly, whereat Dixon frowned as he turned his head away.

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Too-oot! toot! toot! sounded shrilly from the end of the pier: Joe was tuning up the little auto whistle on the launch.

"I guess Dawson wants me," said Tom, rising.

"Guess again," laughed Mrs. Tremaine, in her languid way.

For, at that moment, Joe cast off from the pier, driving the little launch out into the lake. As Henry Tremaine had ordered this boat built and delivered at Lake Okeechobee lately, and had never seen her in operation, he now rose, and went over to the edge of the porch to watch her movements.

"Dawson certainly knows how to make a boat hum," observed the owner of the place.

"It would go twice as well if Halstead were aboard," remarked Oliver Dixon.

"You'll have to stop teasing our young captain, or he'll lose you overboard, some dark night when we get back to sailing on the Gulf," laughed Mrs. Tremaine. Tom fancied there was a slight note of warning in her voice.

"Oh, I wouldn't string Halstead," rejoined Dixon, dryly. "I esteem him too highly and take him too seriously for that."

"Cut it!" uttered Tremaine, in a low voice, as he passed Dixon. That young man started, at such a peremptory command. He glanced over

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at Ida Silsbee, to see a flash of angry remonstrance in her handsome dark eyes.

"Why does the girl take such an interest in this young booby of a so-called captain?" Dixon asked himself, uncomfortably. Then, stretching slightly and indolently, to hide his discomfiture, the young man vanished inside the house.

Joe, meantime, was circling about on the lake, sounding his whistle once in a while, as though he wished to invite the attention of those on the porch. At last he turned and sped back to the pier.

"She seems to run all right, Joe," called Halstead, as his chum came up the boardwalk.

"Runs first rate for a little lake boat," replied Dawson.

"Are you really pleased with the craft?" inquired Henry Tremaine. "I wish you'd tell me candidly, because I ordered her by mail, on the builder's representations. He claimed she'd make fifteen miles an hour."

"The boat will do eleven, all right," nodded Joe. "That's pretty good as fresh water launches run."

"Three hours to luncheon," said Halstead, musingly, looking at his watch. "You spoke of going out this afternoon, Mr. Tremaine. Would you care about going now?"

"No," said the owner. "I'm going inside

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soon to write some letters." Mrs. Tremaine shook her head when Tom glanced at her.

"I'll go out with you, Captain Halstead," cried Miss Silsbee, rising. "Almost anything is better than sitting idly here."

"Do you want to go out again, Joe?" asked Halstead, looking at his chum.

"I would if I were needed, but you can handle the boat all right, old fellow."

"Come on, then, Captain, since you and I are the only ones who are energetic enough to start," cried Ida, gayly.

"I'll ring for Ham, and have him tell Mr. Dixon that there's a seat for him in the boat," proposed Mrs. Tremaine.

"If you do," retorted Miss Silsbee, in a low voice, "I'll stay ashore. Mr. Dixon is very pleasant and attentive, but it's a pleasure to go some places without him."

Tom, who was going slowly down the boardwalk, did not hear this. Ida ran nimbly after him.

"Hurry along, Captain," she cried, "and we won't have to be bothered with an unnecessary third."

Skipper Tom glanced at her in some surprise. He knew Dixon to be deeply devoted to this beautiful girl, and had thought that she was interested in Dixon.

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"I suppose he sticks too closely to her, though," thought Halstead. "Any girl likes to have a little time to herself."

So he helped her gallantly into the launch, started the motor and cast off.

"Hullo, there!" shouted Dixon, running out onto the porch. "Wait! I'll go with you!"

"Make believe you don't hear him," murmured Ida, pouting.

Nothing loath, when backed by such a command, Captain Halstead threw on full speed, sending the launch speeding to the southward. He kept his gaze for some time on the water, seeking for shallows.

"You don't like Mr. Dixon very well, do you?" inquired Miss Silsbee, abruptly, after a while.

Tom started, looking up to find her gaze intently fixed on his face.

"What makes you think that?" he asked.

"Oh, it's just a supposition. I know Mr. Dixon must annoy you a good deal with his teasing. So you can't very well like him."

"Let us suppose it another way," Tom smiled back into her eyes. "Perhaps he doesn't like me, and that's why he is sometimes—well, perhaps a little bit sarcastic."

"I don't see how he can help liking you," returned Ida Silsbee, frankly.

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"Why?"

"Well, you're all that's manly, Captain Halstead."

"Thank you."

"Oh, I mean it," pursued the girl, earnestly. "And I'm so much older than you that I know you won't mind my saying it. What I am trying to arrive at is that I don't want you to get any idea that Mr. Dixon reflects the sentiment of the rest of the party."

"I haven't formed that impression, Miss Silsbee. You all have treated me splendidly—even after that miserable affair of the other morning."

"Oh, Mr. Tremaine is as sorry as possible about that," cried the girl. "He told me himself that he'd much rather lose the money than have anything happen to wound the feelings of Mr. Dawson or yourself. He says you are two of the staunchest, most splendid young fellows he ever expects to meet. It seems he knew that our danger in the gale, the other night, was far greater than he let Mrs. Tremaine or myself suspect. He tells us you were both cool, and brave, and that such young men couldn't be anything but splendid and upright. Mr. Tremaine says he'd cheerfully fight any man who tried to throw doubt over either yourself or Mr. Dawson."

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"That's fine of him," said Tom, gratefully, then added, moodily: "Just the same, I wish that affair of the missing money could be cleared up some way. It hangs over me, in my own mind."

"Then suppose you let me carry your burden for you for a while," proposed Ida Silsbee, looking at him with laughing eyes. "Only, I can't promise not to be careless. I might drop the burden over the first stone wall."

After that the pair chatted merrily enough, while Tom ran the boat along mile after mile, under the soft Florida winter sun. The day was warmer than usual even in this far southern spot.

As the launch glided along they passed small islands now and then, for Lake Okeechobee is well supplied with them.

"Oh, see there! Run in at that island—do!" begged Ida. "See that beautiful moss hanging from that tree. It's different from any other hanging moss I've seen. I'd dearly love to dry some of that moss and take it North with me."

So Tom ran the launch in under slow headway, reached it, and took a hitch of the bow line around the trunk of a small tree that grew at the water's edge.

"Now, help me down, as gallantly as you

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can," appealed Ida Silsbee, standing in the bow of the boat, one hand resting at her skirt.

"You coming ashore?" cried Tom, almost protestingly. "Oh, Miss Silsbee, I am afraid!"

"Of what?"

"Rattlers, or other snakes that may abound on this island."

"Yet you're not afraid for yourself."

"I think I can protect myself."

"Then why not protect me? Oh, I *do* want to go ashore."

Worried, Halstead stepped back into the boat and picked up the stout tiller stick that was meant to be thrust into the rudder post in case the wheel-gear became disabled.

"Keep right behind me, then, please," begged the young skipper, holding the tiller stick in readiness for any reptilian foe he might espy.

The tree in question was some distance inland on the island, past a rise in the ground. Tom, eternally vigilant, piloted Miss Silsbee slowly along, scanning every inch of the ground near them. At last they reached the tree. After inspecting all the ground near by, Halstead climbed the tree, detaching and throwing down a quantity of the pretty moss, which the girl laughingly gathered in her arms. Then the young skipper descended.

"I wonder if my guardian intends to do his

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alligator hunting anywhere around here?" asked the girl.

"Oh, no; the alligators seldom venture into this lake," Tom replied. "We have to go the length of the lake, I understand, and then penetrate for some distance into the Everglades. There are no alligators here."

Just at that moment they came to the rise in the ground, then passed on to descend to the boat.

"No alligators here——" Tom began again, but paused, paling and staring aghast.

For out of the water and up onto the beach crawled two monstrous twelve-foot alligators. They halted on the land just before the boat, opening and snapping their great jaws.

"Ugh! That's a fine sight to run upon when a fellow hasn't any firearms," grated Halstead, hoarsely. He felt the gooseflesh starting all over him.

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CHAPTER VII

DODGING THE OLDEST INHABITANTS OF THE EVERGLADES

JUST in the instant that he halted young Halstead thrust out his left arm, sweeping Ida Silsbee behind him.

"Don't treat me as though you believed me a coward," she remonstrated, speaking in a low voice.

"You'll make me less of a coward if you don't expose yourself needlessly to danger," Tom retorted, in an equally low voice.

Though the alligator is a cumbersome looking animal on land, both knew from their reading that this four-legged reptile will sometimes show unlooked-for speed on its short legs.

Both alligators were now fully on land, their scaled bodies glistening in the soft sunlight. One had opened its great jaws as though to yawn, and the other at once followed the example.

Both stood within half a dozen feet of the launch's bow, which meant that a sudden dash for the boat was out of the question.

"With this stick in my hand I feel like an amateur fireman trying to put out the San Francisco

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fire with a watering-pot," Halstead whispered, dryly.

Ida Silsbee laughed low and nervously.

"Do alligators climb trees?" she asked.

"I never heard of one that could do it."

"Then, at the worst, we might climb a tree. I—I suppose you could help me."

"I'd sooner be in that launch, with the engine started, than up any tree on the island," the boy answered.

"What would you do, if you were alone?" the girl asked.

"I don't know. I might take to the water, swim to the stern of the launch, climb in and try to shove off."

"Then why don't you do it?"

"And leave you alone, Miss Silsbee, even for a few moments?"

"I could run across the island if those ugly-looking beasts started in my direction. You could pick me up at some other point of the shore."

"Have you forgotten the snakes?" demanded Tom.

"Ugh! Don't make me more afraid."

"I don't want to, Miss Silsbee. But neither do I want to see you forget any of the risks of our position."

One of the big alligators, after eyeing them

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for some moments, started up the rise of ground toward them. From the slowness of its movements it looked as though the huge thing was bent mainly on securing a good point at which to sun itself, but Halstead and the girl retreated slowly.

"See," whispered Halstead, "the other 'gator is moving a bit east along the shore. Let's run down to the west shore. There we may be in a position to reach the launch bye and bye."

As they stole along cautiously, in the direction Tom had indicated, each had to be careful in picking footing on the soft, springy ground, else it was impossible to tell when they might step upon a hidden rattler. Yet they gained the shore, at last, Tom in the lead. Here they halted, a hundred feet from the launch. By this time the first alligator had halted near the crest of the rise. Turning slowly, the beast was eyeing the fugitives blinkingly. The second alligator was now some thirty feet from the further side of the launch, though still quite close to the water.

"I wonder——" began Tom, hesitatingly.

"What?"

"Whether I could sprint along the shore like a streak, push the launch off, jump in, and then have time to start the engine and get down here for you?"

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The 'Gator Started Up the Rise Toward Them.

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"Would you do that if you were here all alone?"

"In a second!"

"Then do it anyway," begged Ida Silsbee. "I'm not brave, but I can take a fighting chance and follow orders."

"I'm thinking of the risk, if——" began Halstead again, musingly and in a low voice.

"If what?"

"Well, what if the 'gator, seeing me coming, should turn and charge me, just miss me, and keep coming right on for you?"

"I'd run into the water, Mr. Halstead, for you to pick me up."

"Good heavens! In the water that 'gator could go a hundred feet, almost, to your one!"

"Then I'd dash along the shore as fast as I could, until you could run the boat down and pick me up."

"I'm going to try it," decided Halstead, coolly. "It seems to promise the greatest safety for you."

"But yourself?"

"Oh, confound me! I'm a boy."

"You're a man, Tom Halstead, and a splendid one at that!"

"I shall get my head turned, at this rate," replied Tom, smiling dryly. "I'd better run at once."

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Grasping Ida Silsbee's right hand, he thrust the tiller stick into it.

"Hold onto this. Don't drop the stick, no matter what happens," he directed. "Use it against 'gators—or snakes."

Then, without loss of an instant's time, he turned and sprinted desperately. A hundred feet is a short distance when one is traveling as though on air.

Seeing the boy coming, the alligator wheeled clumsily about. By this time, however, Tom Halstead's hands rested against the bow of the boat. At the start of the run he had opened his sailor's clasp knife. At one stout slash the boy cut the line holding the boat. Then he shoved off with his hands, and made a flying vault into the boat. Nor did he lose a second, as the boat drifted out from the shore, in starting the motor.

After the first moment's hesitation the big 'gator started for the boat, as if scenting an enemy that might be vanquished. Seeing the high bow of the launch slip away, the 'gator kept on, lumberingly, toward Miss Silsbee.

Chug! chug! chug! sounded the motor's exhaust, firing like pistol shots. The clumsy beast stopped an instant, as though wondering what new style of attack this could be on man's part. Then, finding that no harm came, the big saurian

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reptile eyed Ida Silsbee's fluttering skirts, and kept on lumbering toward her.

"Stay where you are!" called Tom Halstead, in a cool, low voice. It was typical of him that, the greater the danger, the more intense his coolness. His right hand on the wheel, the other ready to shift the motor control, he darted in to where Miss Silsbee stood bravely eyeing the oncoming alligator.

As the bow grated, Tom Halstead sprang up. "Your hand!" he cried. "Like lightning!"

As she sprang, then half-stumbled, the alligator's head was hardly more than twenty feet away. With a quick out-shoot of its breath the big creature hastened forward.

Tom half lifted, half dragged Ida into the boat, at the same time taking the tiller stick from her. Almost at the instant when her heels cleared the gunwale a huge pair of jaws loomed up close beside the bow.

Not really pausing to think what he did, Halstead let out a yell that would have done credit to one of the Seminole aborigines of the Everglades. In the same flashing instant he rammed the tiller stick far down into the mouth of the alligator.

His left hand caught the reverse gear. The propeller churned and the launch glided out, stern foremost, into deeper water, while the alli-

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gator, bringing its jaws down with a crunching snap on the bar of wood, went through some absurd antics in trying to expel the tiller stick from its mouth. Then Tom Halstead laughed.

"Not such bad sport, eh, Miss Silsbee?"

He had backed far enough out, now, to turn on the speed ahead and swing around, heading north.

Though she trembled a bit from excitement, Ida Silsbee leaned forward, catching the boy's disengaged right hand and holding it in friendly pressure for a moment.

"Tom Halstead, it's more than a pleasure to know one like you!"

The young captain laughed quietly as he thanked her.

"I reckon we'll have some appetite for lunch, now, Miss Silsbee. Yet I almost feel that I owe you an apology."

"For what, pray?"

"For not having been clever enough to find some way of killing that lumbering beast and presenting you with its hide. What a novel suit-case it would have made for you."

Ida Silsbee laughed merrily. There was so much clear grit in her make-up that she had now recovered her composure fully.

"You're not easily pleased, are you?" she challenged, whimsically.

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"Well, we'll have to admit we made a bungle of the affair all around," teased Tom. "For you see, after all we left the moss behind on the island."

"Oh, that moss!" cried the girl, pouting. "I'm glad I did drop it, for I shall always hate that particular species of moss whenever I think of the fate it so nearly brought upon us."

The launch was now slipping over the water at its full speed, so it was not long ere these young travelers came in sight of the Tremaine winter bungalow once more.

Henry Tremaine and his wife were alone on the porch as the boat's whistle sounded just before the landing was made.

Oliver Dixon had stolen away by himself, consuming himself with rage over the fact that Ida should have chosen to slip away without inviting him. Dixon came outside, however, as the young people came up the boardwalk together.

"Oh, Mrs. Tremaine, you have missed such a stirring time," hailed Miss Silsbee, gayly.

Tom Halstead laughed, quietly. Hearing their arrival, Joe also came out. Miss Silsbee, of course, had to describe their adventure, in which Tom Halstead's share lost nothing by her telling.

"I hope you'll take a sufficient warning from this, child," said Mr. Tremaine, presently.

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"Never venture onto any of the islands, or in any of these woods hereabouts, unless beaters go ahead of you to rouse up and despatch whatever snakes there may be lurking under the bushes."

"Beaters?" inquired the girl.

"Yes; any of the negroes, like Ham, for instance. They don't mind snakes. They hunt them for sport."

Ham Mockus made his presence in the background noted.

"Men of your color don't mind hunting snakes, do you, Ham?" asked the host.

"No, sah. Ah reckons not much, sah."

"In fact, none of the natives here stand much in dread of reptiles," continued Tremaine. "They're used to hunting them, and seem to develop a special instinct for knowing where the snakes are. Young Randolph and Ham, I venture to believe, would go through a twenty-acre field, finding and killing all the snakes there happened to be there."

"This talk is becoming rather annoying, my dear," shivered Mrs. Tremaine.

"I beg your pardon, then," responded her husband, quickly. "We'll consider something more cheerful."

"Dat's w'ut Ah gwine come to tell yo' 'bout," declared Ham, gravely. "Ladies an' gemmen, luncheon's done served. Yassuh!"

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CHAPTER VIII

A CRACK SHOT AT THE GAME

WHILE the party were thus engaged in discussing the luncheon, the young Randolph referred to, Jefferson being his Christian name, was busy in another room of the bungalow, cleaning alligator rifles.

Jeff was the sixteen-year-old son of Officer Randolph. Despite his youth, this young man, who was tall, slim, wiry and strong, had already led several successful alligator hunts in the Everglades. He had been engaged, on his father's recommendation, for this expedition. Officer Randolph, in the meantime, had consented to make his headquarters aboard the "Restless," which fact permitted both Tom and Joe to get their first taste of alligator sport.

Throughout the luncheon, Oliver Dixon, though he had succeeded in obtaining the chair next to Ida Silsbee's, remained for the most part silent and distrait, a prey to hatred of the young motor boat captain.

"If a few more things like this adventure happen," Dixon told himself, "I shall be pretty certain to find Ida slipping away from me altogether. It seems absurd to think of a full-grown

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young woman like her falling in love with a mere boy. Bah! That really can't happen, of course. Yet it isn't wholly unlikely that she'll become so much interested in Tom Halstead's kind that my sort of man won't appeal to her. I must be watchful and keep myself properly in the foreground."

If young Dixon felt himself much devoted to Ida Silsbee, even he knew that he was much more attracted by the fact that, as money went, Ida Silsbee was a rather important heiress.

One of Dixon's basic faults was that he hated useful work. He would much rather live on a rich wife's money.

By the time that the meal was over the fortune-hunter had come to one important conclusion.

"If I want to stand well with Ida," he told himself, "then I must conceal my feelings well enough to keep on seemingly good terms with this young Halstead cub. I've got to treat the boy pleasantly, and make him like me. Otherwise, a girl who places her friendships as impulsively as Ida Silsbee does is likely to conceive an actual dislike for me. That would be a fearful obstacle to my plans!"

So, as all rose from the table at Mrs. Tremaine's signal, Dixon inquired, pleasantly:

"Going back down the lake for a chance at

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that pair of 'gators this afternoon, Halstead?"

"I don't know," Tom answered. "I'm wholly at Mr. Tremaine's disposal."

"Jove! I don't know that it would be such a bad plan," mused Henry Tremaine. "What do you say, my dear?"

"Would it be neccesary for any of us to leave the boat?" asked Mrs. Tremaine, cautiously.

"Not at all necessary."

"Is there any danger of the horrid things trying to climb into the boat?"

"I never heard of a 'gator trying to do such a thing."

"Or would an alligator be at all likely to swim under the boat, then rise, overturning us?"

"I think I can promise you that no self-respecting alligator would think of doing such a thing," laughed Mr. Tremaine.

"Then I'm ready enough to vote for going," agreed Mrs. Tremaine.

"Halstead—Dawson—you know what that means," warned the owner of the place.

"How soon will you start, sir?" inquired Tom.

"We ought to be ready within twenty minutes."

"Then Joe and I will have the boat ready, sir. Anything we can carry down to the launch?"

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"No; we'll take only rifles and ammunition, which will be all we'll want. Ham, you'll watch the house while we're gone."

"Yassuh."

Suddenly the colored steward's eyes rolled apprehensively.

"But Marse Tremaine, yo'll sho'ly be back befo' dahk, sah?"

"Why?"

"Because, sah, Ah don' wanter be lef' yere after dahk, sah. Dat yere Ghost ob Alligator Swamp, sah——"

"Oh, I quite understand, Ham," laughed Henry Tremaine. "Well, we'll promise to be back quite a bit before early candle-lighting."

Soon afterwards the launch party started, young Jeff Randolph going along in charge of "the arsenal," as he termed the shooting outfit.

Joe, after starting the motor and seeing the boat clear the dock, settled back lazily. Tom was up in the bow, beside the steering wheel. Miss Silsbee found the seat next to him. Mr. Dixon took the seat at her other side, exerting himself to be agreeable both to her and to the young captain.

"Take us right to that same island, Halstead, if you can find it," requested the owner.

"Do you expect the alligators will have remained there all this time?" questioned Dixon.

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"It's hardly likely," admitted Tremaine. "Yet, that particular island will be a good starting point from which to look about. Of course, the chances are that we shan't find the 'gators. Isn't that right, Randolph?"

"Yes, sir," replied Jeff, slowly. "The only sure way to get some really good sport will be to leave your house some morning before daylight, go right along the lake and be well into the Everglades by ten o'clock. That would give us about six hours to look for 'gators, and we would be pretty sure to bag one or two in that time. But 'gators know how to be wary, sir, as you know from having hunted them before."

"Yes," agreed the host. "I've known a party to be out four days before one of the rascals was landed at last. But he was a whopping fellow—almost as big as one of the pair Miss Silsbee and Halstead encountered this morning."

"Don't you suppose," laughed Dixon, turning to the girl, "that your eyes magnified, just a bit, the pair you saw this morning?"

"I know my eyes must have exaggerated," laughed Ida, "for, at the time, I'd have been willing to depose that neither brute was less than a hundred and fifty feet long, which all the natural history books declare to be impossible."

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"There's the island, isn't it, Miss Silsbee?" Captain Halstead asked, after a while.

"Yes," nodded the girl. "I'm sure it must be. Yes! There's the identical tree you robbed of the moss that we forgot to bring away with us."

She laughed heartily, her mirth and the resting of her gaze on Tom making Dixon secretly more furious than ever.

"Let me have the wheel, now," volunteered Joe, moving into place. "You'll want your eyes on the lookout for game now."

"Slow down the speed a whole lot," directed Halstead. "If we're going to explore this stretch of water we don't want to travel too fast."

"That's right," nodded Mr. Tremaine. "And, Dawson, if we sight an alligator, we don't want more than to creep over the water. 'Gators are wary of fast-moving boats, and they're easily scared below the surface by voices."

"I see something," whispered Ida Silsbee, some ten minutes later, pointing over the water.

A dark object floated on the water, some four hundred yards distant. It was plain, too, that the object was moving.

" 'Gator snout," whispered Tremaine, enthusiastically. "Jove, I didn't think we'd sight anything out on the lake, like this!"

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"Shall I steer for it, sir?" asked Joe, in an undertone.

"Yes, but let the boat just barely crawl."

Tom Halstead's eyes were gleaming, now, with the spirit of the chase.

"That's the snout of a mighty big old rogue of a 'gator," murmured Mr. Tremaine in Tom's ear. "It must be one of the pair you and Ida saw this morning."

"Gun, sir," murmured Jeff Randolph, passing over a loaded rifle.

"Do you know how to shoot, Halstead?" asked the launch's owner.

"Do I?" murmured the boy, his eyes gleaming.

"Want a crack at that 'gator?"

"*Don't* I?"

"Pass Halstead a rifle," nodded Mr. Tremaine.

Jeff did so, adding:

"If you never shot a rifle of as heavy calibre as this one, Captain, look out for the recoil."

Tom Halstead caressed the barrel of the rifle lovingly as Joe Dawson made the boat slowly creep toward that floating head.

"I'm going to try a shot now," announced Mr. Tremaine. "You be ready, Halstead. If I miss, you fire instantly."

Bang! A bullet splashed the water just be-

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yond that dark head. Before Tom could fire the snout dropped below the surface.

"Stop the speed. Reverse!" whispered Mr. Tremaine, tensely. "There! Hold her just where she is."

For some moments the launch drifted without headway, while every pair of eyes watched eagerly for the reappearance of the alligator's snout.

"There it——" began Oliver Dixon.

Bang! As the alligator's head showed again, some distance from the spot where it had vanished, Tom Halstead sighted swift as thought, and pressed the trigger.

"Jove! You hit the beast!" cried Mr. Tremaine, excitedly, as a commotion started in the water where the huge reptile floated.

Then, suddenly, the whole length of the body appeared. The 'gator rolled over on its back and lay motionless.

"Great curling smoke! You killed the beast, Halstead!" cried Henry Tremaine, a-quiver with enthusiasm.

There could be no doubt that the creature was lying still on its back.

"I fired for one of the eyes," admitted the young motor boat skipper.

"You hit the eye, then, and pierced what little brain the beast has," declared Henry Tre-

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maine. "Run us up alongside, Dawson. Jeff, get out one of the towing lines. Jove! What a fine afternoon's sport, almost within sight of the bungalow."

"You shoot as splendidly as you do everything else, Tom!" effused Ida Silsbee.

"I guess it was a fluke shot," Tom laughed, modestly.

But Oliver Dixon noted the use of his first name by the girl, and Dixon's heart burned with jealousy.

Joe ran the boat up alongside the motionless, overturned alligator. Mr. Tremaine and Jeff bent far out over the gunwale, deftly, expertly slipped a noose taut over the hard, scaled tail of the dead creature, then made the line fast at the stern of the boat.

"We'll cruise about a bit longer," decided Mr. Tremaine. "I don't believe we'll get anything more like this, though, out in the open lake. I don't believe I ever heard of a 'gator being shot out here in the lake before."

"It happens once in a while," nodded Jeff, gravely.

They cruised for an hour more, after which Henry Tremaine declared they might as well return.

"We may do bigger shooting in the Everglades, to-morrow," he suggested. "Still, one

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big brute like this in a day is sport enough for any crowd."

"I'm sure it's one of the beasts that crowded us off the island," asserted Ida Silsbee.

"It looks very much like the one that charged you," Tom assented.

"Then you two adventurers told no fibs about the size," laughed Mr. Tremaine. "That fellow is fully a dozen feet long."

"What are you going to do with your prize, Captain?" asked Mrs. Tremaine, as Joe drove the launch northward at somewhat diminshed speed on account of the tow behind.

"Does the 'gator belong to me?" Halstead asked.

"It certainly does," nodded Mr. Tremaine.

"Then I offer the hide and the teeth to Mrs. Tremaine and Miss Silsbee," responded the young motor boat captain.

Both ladies expressed their thanks.

"If I get a second one," Tom continued, "I shall send the hide to a manufacturer to have a genuine alligator bag or two made for my mother."

"Take this one," urged Mrs. Tremaine.

"No; it's only fair that the first prize should go to the ladies of this party," argued Halstead.

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CHAPTER IX

THE GHOST INVITED

"DE mail man done been yere," was the greeting of Ham, as the elated party walked up to the porch of the bungalow. The darkey held out a dozen letters to Mr. Tremaine.

That gentleman ran hastily through the letters, dropping four into one of his own pockets and passing some to the others.

"And one for you, Captain, from Tres Arbores," added Henry Tremaine, passing over the last to the young motor boat skipper.

"A bill for something I ordered for the boat, I guess," nodded Halstead, slipping the envelope into his pocket.

It was now within an hour of sunset. The alligator had been hauled up onto the pier, where Jeff, with Ham's aid, would remove the hide later in the evening.

"You don't seem curious about your letter, Captain," smiled Ida, when she had glanced through two of her own.

"Is one ever curious or eager about bills?" laughed Tom. "I've three or four accounts down in Tres Arbores for supplies furnished

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for the boat. But I can't settle any of them until we go back to the bay."

As the air was growing somewhat chilly, with the sinking of the sun, the others passed on into the living room, where Ham had a blazing wood fire ready for them. Tom, however, remained outside, preferring the fresh air.

After strolling about the grounds for some little time, he stepped into an arbor. It seemed curious to this Northern boy to think of a leaf-clad arbor in December, but here it was, with vines growing luxuriantly over the trellis work. There was a seat there, and Tom sank onto it. He was thinking hard about the robbery in the starboard stateroom on the morning of their arrival in Oyster Bay. No more had been said about it by any member of the party, yet with Tom Halstead the subject would not down.

"Of course, the Tremaines and Miss Silsbee must often remember that I was the only one outside their party who had access to the cabin during the night of the storm," he mused. "They're all mighty kind to me, yet what must they think when they sometimes get to wondering? Of course, Oliver Dixon was the scoundrel. I saw him fix the contents of the water bottle from that vial of his. He knew that only Mr. Tremaine drank water just before turning in. Dixon robbed his friend, after drugging

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him. Yet what a wild story it would be, backed by no word but my own. Joe is right; I've got to hold my tongue and be patient. Mr. Tremaine would think it all a cock-and-bull story if I told him what I saw Dixon doing. Gracious, but it's hard to keep quiet and wait. The truth most likely will never come out—and there'll always be that lurking suspicion of me!"

After some minutes Halstead remembered the letter from Tres Arbores. Some instinct prompted him to take it out and open it. Instead of being a bill, as he had suspected, it was a letter.

"Jumping bow-lines!"

Tom Halstead was fairly staggered as he glanced through that short epistle in the waning light of day. The letter was signed by Clayton Randolph, the policeman at Tres Arbores, and it ran:

I am taking this chanse of writing you, as I know the mail goes up to-day. I am on board your boat most the time, all is well there. Now I have something to tell you I know will intrest you. You remember the afternoon of the day you landed here, you and partner stayed here in the afternoon, but Tremane and his party drove over to Tunis that afternoon. Dixon must found a chanse to slip the rest of the party, for he went to the xpress office and sent a package to Ninth National Bank New York, said the value was 3200 dollars. Maybe real value was more but he thought that enough to make xpress people careful. Now

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it happens my oldest boy, Joe, is xpress agent at Tunis. He was down here to-day and when he heard about robbery he told me about Dixon sending package. Maybe you can put two things together. I tell you this because I like you and believe you're straight.

Tom Halstead read this illuminating missive over slowly, aloud, with growing wonder in his voice.

"Wow! That's clear enough. Then Oliver Dixon *did* steal the money, and he has sent it to a New York bank," cried young Halstead, all a-quiver with the bigness of the news. "Oh, the scoundrel!"

Nor was "the scoundrel" himself shaking any the less, at that moment. For Oliver Dixon stood on the other side of that thick curtain of leaves. Walking about the grounds, with his cat-like tread, Dixon had heard Tom Halstead's first excited exclamation. Drawing softly close, he had heard the young skipper's artless reading of that exciting letter.

First of all Dixon's face went deathly pale. His knees shook under him. He looked like a man going through the agonies of severe fright.

By the time Tom had finished the reading, however, Dixon had regained his self-control. There was a deep scowl on his face. His fists clenched tightly.

"Now, that young cub will go and show the

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letter. It will be enough to start even easy-going Henry Tremaine on an investigation. Ruin!" Oliver Dixon confessed to himself. "Oh, what an idiot I was. And yet I needed that money! But now I may as well run away from here at once. I'm done for. Ida Silsbee wouldn't consider me even fit to be her footmat. I'll hustle away from here without an excuse."

Collected, cool enough, but feeling that all was up, Oliver Dixon stole away from the arbor in which the dazed young motor boat skipper still sat, staring at the sheet he held in his hand.

"I guess there's just one thing to do," muttered Tom. "That will be to go and show this letter to Mr. Tremaine. He can do as he pleases about it. If that robbery had happened within the limits of Tres Arbores, Clayton Randolph wouldn't have written the letter; he'd have come here with handcuffs."

Dixon, having gained the porch, where he found himself alone, paused to light a cigarette and ponder fast.

"I wonder if all is lost, though?" he muttered. "If I could only get hold of that note, and silence Tom Halstead! Then I could try the value of braving it out for a while. It's a fearful thought, that of losing Ida Silsbee and her fortune!"

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Briefly Dixon thought of the possibility of being able to bribe Halstead with a substantial portion of the stolen money. But the rascal shook his head. Much as he disliked the young motor boat captain, the thief was bound to admit to himself that the boy would probably prove incorruptible.

"Especially, if he's under the witchery of Ida's eyes!" thought Dixon, with another burst of miserable jealousy.

"I wonder if it would be safe to steal upon him, down in the arbor, and——"

Oliver Dixon shuddered at the thought that surged up in his mind. Bad though the fellow was, his rascality had its limits.

"I'll wait and see what I can do," thought the wretched one, finally. "At the worst, I imagine I could bluff it out, for a day or so, anyway, by claiming that Halstead had put up a job to have that letter mailed to him. By Jove, I'll stay and fight it out, whatever happens, until I find I'm floored past help. With Ida Silsbee's fortune in sight, and Tremaine appearing to like me, the stakes are high enough for a really brave, desperate fight. That's it—fight! Against any odds!"

Tossing away his cigarette into the growing darkness outdoors, and forcing himself to appear wholly at ease, Dixon stepped inside, greet-

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ing the group in the living room with one of his pleasantest smiles.

Being rather crudely equipped, the bungalow possessed an old-fashioned wash-room.

Just as Halstead entered, the men-folks were starting for this wash-room, as Ham had announced that supper would be ready in a few minutes. Here Tremaine and Dixon removed their coats, the two Motor Boat Club boys and Jeff slipping off theirs at the same time. There being but two basins, some waiting had to be done. When Mr. Tremaine and Dixon started back to the living room, Tom nudged his chum, whispering:

"Wait a moment, Joe. I've something to show you."

Presently Jeff Randolph, having finished washing and combing his hair, sauntered slowly out. Then the young skipper thrust a hand into his inner coat pocket.

"What! Where did I put that?" muttered Tom, uneasily.

"What was it?" asked Joe Dawson, curiously.

But his chum, instead of replying, rapidly explored all his pockets, then hunted busily about the room.

"It must be something mighty important, whatever it is," smiled Joe.

"It is," was all Tom vouchsafed. Then, un-

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able to discover any trace of the letter, Halstead turned to his comrade with a blank face.

"What have you lost?" demanded Joe Dawson, struck by Tom's serious look.

"I—I guess I won't speak about it, until I find it," responded Halstead, slowly, in a dazed, wondering voice. He felt as though passing through some dream. Had he really received such a letter? But of course he had.

"Oh, just as you like," responded Joe, readily.

"Wait!" begged Tom. "I want to look—and think—before I say a word, even to you, old fellow."

"All right, then," nodded Joe, patiently.

Oliver Dixon, who had slipped back to where he could see and hear without being detected, smiled in a satisfied way. *He* knew where that missing letter was!

Five minutes later all hands were seated at the table, while Ham, with the important look he always wore when presiding over a dinner, bustled about.

When the hot, steaming food was laid before them, Tom was barely able to eat, noting which, Joe wondered, though he was content to wait for the answer.

Oliver Dixon, on the other hand, was in excellent spirits, eating with relish while he chatted brilliantly with his hosts and with Ida Silsbee.

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Indeed, his companions thought they had never seen the young man to better advantage. Ida was conscious of an increased interest in her suitor.

"Let's see, Ham," propounded Henry Tremaine, after a while, "we're right in the region of your famous ghost, now, aren't we?"

"Don' talk erbout dat, sah—please don't yo'," begged the negro, glancing uneasily at his employer.

"Why not?" inquired Mr. Tremaine.

"'Cause, sah, talkin' erbout de Ghost ob Alligator Swamp is jest erbout de same t'ing as 'viting it heah, sah. Ef yo' speak erbout it, sah, it's a'most shuah to come heah, sah."

That Ham Mockus believed what he was saying was but too evident, so kindly Henry Tremaine dropped the subject with a short laugh.

"It was one of the tightest places I was ever in," declared Oliver Dixon, who was relating an imaginary hunting adventure to Miss Silsbee and Mrs. Tremaine. "I felt buck ague when I saw that animal's glaring, blazing eyes——"

Just at that moment Ham was re-entering the room with a tray laden with good things.

From outside there came a sudden, sobbing sound. It was followed, instantly, by a long-drawn-out wail. Instantly this was taken up by a chorus of high-pitched, unearthly shrieks.

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Crash! Ham dropped the tray and its contents, which went to smash in the middle of the room.

"Dere it am—oh, Lawdy, dere it am!" yelled Ham Mockus, sinking to his knees. "It's It—de Ghost ob Alligator Swamp!"

CHAPTER X

THE VISITATION OF THE NIGHT

AS suddenly as it had started the weird noise died away.

"Get up, Ham, you idiot," commanded Henry Tremaine, crisply.

"Ah—Ah's shuah scahd to death!" stuttered the negro, looking up appealingly, but not rising from his knees.

"You look it," laughed the owner of the house. "But it's all foolishness. There's no such thing as a ghost."

"W—w—w—w'uts dat yo' say?" sputtered Ham Mockus, turning the whites of two badly scared eyes in Mr. Tremaine's direction.

"I say that there is no such thing as a ghost."

"Yo' say so aftah hearing—*dat?*"

"Neighbors giving us a grisly serenade," retorted Tremaine, grinning. "Whatever it is, that noise came from strictly human sources."

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"W'ut? Me Gwine ter Dat Kitchen—All Alone?"

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"Yassuh! Yassuh!" quavered Ham, as though he wanted to be accommodating, yet pitied the white man's ignorance.

"You really think it's all nonsense of some kind, my dear?" asked Mrs. Tremaine, who, though not giving way to fright, looked unusually grave.

"I'm so certain it's all nonsense—or malice," replied her husband, "that I'm going on with my supper if I can prevail upon Ham to bring me something more to eat."

The colored man had risen from his knees, but had moved over close to the table, where he stood as though incapable of motion.

"You heard Mr. Tremaine, Hamilton?" asked Mrs. Tremaine, rousingly.

"Yassum. Yassum."

"Then why don't you bring food to replace what you dropped?"

"Yassum."

"*Then why don't you start?*"

"W'ut? Me gwine ter dat kitchen—all alone?" almost shrieked Ham.

"Go with him, won't you, Jeff?" asked the host, turning to their young guide.

Jeff Randolph pushed away his chair, rising and signing to the negro to follow. This Ham did, though moving with reluctant feet. At the door of the kitchen Jeff halted, to scowl at Ham

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and hurry him up. Then both stepped through into the next room. As they did so, both with a howl retreated back into the living room, while an outer door banged.

"Now—what?" demanded Henry Tremaine, rising from the table and rushing toward the pair.

"Well, sir, I don't want to look like a fool," retorted Jeff, just a bit unsteadily, "but I certainly saw something in white— and about ten feet high—cross the kitchen. That something ducked and stole out through the back door."

There was no doubting Jeff's truthfulness, nor his courage, either, in any ordinary sense. Yet, at this moment, the Florida boy certainly did look uneasy.

"Come along, you two, and I'm going out with you," spoke Tremaine, decisively, stepping into the kitchen and drawing a revolver from a hip pocket. "If we run into any ghost—then so much the worse for the ghost!"

With Henry Tremaine on guard in the kitchen, Jeff and Ham went, too, getting what food was necessary, then returning to the dining room with it. Tremaine locked and bolted the outer kitchen door, dropping the key into his pocket. After that, the meal was finished in peace, though Ham took mighty great pains to remain close to the white folks.

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Nor was there any further disturbance through the evening. All retired, to their rooms on the second floor, before ten o'clock.

"What do you make of all this?" asked Joe, as he and his chum were disrobing in their room.

"Some kind of buncombe, of course," replied Tom, thoughtfully. "Yet I can't see any object or sense in it."

"One thing we know, anyway," decided Joe. "Whatever is behind the rumpus, there's something in all this talk about the Ghost of Alligator Swamp."

"There's usually a little fire underneath a lot of smoke," was Captain Halstead's answer.

Joe Dawson went to sleep very soon. Not so with Tom Halstead, who lay tossing a long time, thinking over that letter and its sudden disappearance.

"However, there's no doubt about Dixon, now, anyway," Halstead reflected. "I'll watch him from now on. Somehow, he'll take enough rope, sooner or later, to hang himself."

He was thinking of that when he dropped asleep. How long he slept he did not know. It was some time well along in the night when every human being in the bungalow was awakened by the sharp crashing of breaking glass. After the happenings of the early evening all the party were sleeping lightly.

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Tom and Joe hit the floor with their feet almost in the same second. While Dawson raced to a window, throwing it up, young Halstead began hastily to throw on his clothing.

From the two adjoining rooms, occupied by the Tremaines and Miss Silsbee, came the sound of women's voices, talking excitedly.

"I didn't see anything," reported Joe, bustling back, "though the racket was on this side of the house."

As Tom Halstead darted into the hallway he encountered Henry Tremaine. They raced down stairs together, Joe coming next, with Dixon promptly after him. Then Jeff arrived at the foot of the stairs. Ham Mockus, as might have been expected, did not put in an appearance.

Tremaine carried with him a lighted lantern. Tom quickly lighted two lamps.

All the lights of glass in three windows of the living room had been smashed, the fragments of glass strewing the floor.

"This is an unghostly trick," declared Tremaine, wrathily. "This is plain, malicious mischief. Fortunately, I have glass and putty with which we can repair this damage. But I want to tell you all, right now, if you see a ghost, pot it with a bullet if you can. We'll keep the rifles at hand during the rest of our stay here."

They went to the rifles, loaded them and

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waited, after extinguishing the lights. No more sounds or "signs" bothered the watchers. After an hour of watching, Tremaine, who was a good sleeper, began to yawn.

"I'll tell you what, sir," proposed Halstead, finally. "Joe and I will remain on guard, on opposite sides of the house. You and Mr. Dixon may as well turn in and get some sleep."

"All right, then," agreed the owner. "But see here, you call me in two hours, and Dixon and I will come down for a turn at this business. We've got to catch this 'ghost,' if there's any chance at all; yet we must all of us have some sleep."

So the two Motor Boat Club boys, each provided with rifle and box of cartridges, stepped outside to keep the first watch. At some distance apart both patrolled slowly around the house, keeping sharp watch of the shadows under the nearest of the trees that covered most of the landscape. Once in a while the two boys met for consultation in low tones.

"Nothing doing in the ghostly line," yawned Tom, at last.

"There won't be," nodded Joe, "as long as the ghost knows there's an armed, unafraid guard patrolling."

"Then what can it all mean?" wondered Halstead. "What object can any human beings

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have in annoying other human beings in this fashion?"

Joe shook his head. It was all equally past *his* powers of comprehension.

Nothing happened up to the end of the two hours. Then, while Joe remained outside alone, for a few moments, Halstead went to call Mr. Tremaine. That gentleman and Dixon soon appeared to take up the guard work, which would last until within two hours of daylight.

"Tremaine, can you keep the watch here by yourself, for a while?" inquired Oliver Dixon, in an undertone.

"Yes, of course. Why?"

"Then I want to slip away presently. I won't do so at once because I don't want to attract attention of anyone who may be watching us in the woods. Yet I want to get into the woods, to hide and watch there."

"You evidently are not afraid to go into the creepy places," smiled the host.

"Of course I'm not," rejoined Dixon. "What I want to do is to see if I can't trap some of the human beings who are at the bottom of this nonsense."

"Try it, and good luck to you, my boy," agreed Tremaine, cordially.

Some time later, Oliver Dixon succeeded in slipping quietly away under the trees. Not even

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Henry Tremaine knew quite when it was done. After that, an hour passed, during which the owner of the bungalow patrolled alone about his grounds. Then with startling rapidity there came from the woods the sound of four rifle shots.

"Dixon must have stumbled into something!" muttered Henry Tremaine, wheeling and running towards the spot from which the shots seemed to come.

Just before he reached the edge of the woods Mr. Tremaine halted, for Dixon rushed out from under the trees at him. The young man was panting.

"You act as though you'd really seen the ghost," laughed Henry Tremaine, dryly.

"I—I—guess I did!" gasped Dixon. "It was something white, anyway, and about ten feet high—an indescribable, almost shapeless mass of white."

"You fired four shots at it?"

"Yes; almost at arm's length."

"Did it drop?"

"No; nor run away. It came straight at me—my legs saved me."

"Let's go back into the woods after it," proposed Tremaine, intrepidly.

But Oliver Dixon caught at his host's arm, muttering hoarsely:

"N-n-not until I get my nerve back, anyway!"

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CHAPTER XI

TOM HAS A SPOOK HUNT OF HIS OWN

"WHY, my boy," murmured Mr. Tremaine, in a kindly tone, "you appear to be altogether demoralized."

"I am a bit upset, just for the moment," Dixon admitted. "Yet I am not a coward."

"You don't believe, actually, there are any such things as ghosts?" queried his host.

"Certainly not!"

"Then——"

"But I can't begin to account for what I saw, nor for what happened. Tremaine, what would you say if you saw a white apparition—a big one—and if you fired four shots through it, almost at arm's length, without injuring that apparition? What then?"

"I'd be puzzled, I admit," assented the older man. "I can't understand your experience."

"I guess I'm a bit steadier, now," laughed Oliver Dixon, presently. "Now, what do you want to do, Tremaine? I'm with you for whatever you say."

"Why, we can't both leave the house. Will you watch here while I go into the woods where you met with your adventure?"

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"Are you going alone?" demanded the younger man, as though a good deal astonished.

"Why, yes; certainly."

"Don't you think it foolhardy?"

"Well, *you* got out alive, didn't you?" questioned Henry Tremaine, with a quizzical smile. "I'll hope for at least just as good luck."

"Shan't I call the boys, and have at least one of them go with you? Or else, leave them on guard here, while I go with you?"

"It isn't necessary," decided the owner of the bungalow, promptly. "The boys need some sleep to-night. Let them sleep. You stay here and I'll try to pick up your route through the woods. Now, describe to me, as well as you can, where you went."

This Dixon either did, or pretended to do.

"Keep your eyes all around the outside of the house here," was Tremaine's last word, after which, holding his rifle at ready, he trudged off over the grounds and into the woods.

More than an hour passed before the owner of the bungalow came back.

"I saw nothing—absolutely nothing, nor heard anything," reported Mr. Tremaine. "Dixon, I can't fathom your experience in the woods."

"I can't either," admitted the younger man.

It did not occur to the older man to doubt

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Dixon. Though their acquaintance was recent, Dixon had impressed Henry Tremaine as being a gentleman, and dependable.

For some little time the two discussed Dixon's alleged experience with the ghost, as they strolled around the house through the dark. At last it came time to call Tom Halstead and Joe Dawson for their next tour of watch duty, and Tremaine went inside to arouse them.

Though gaping a bit drowsily, both boys responded promptly, taking over the rifles and a supply of ammunition from the men whom they were to relieve.

"When you two get through it will be daylight," announced Mr. Tremaine. "Slip into the house, then, and get at least a bit of a nap. I'll see to it that you're called in plenty of time for the day's sport. Get all the sleep you possibly can."

Following this, Mr. Tremaine gave a brief account of Dixon's "adventure." Then Dixon himself gave a more detailed description of his alleged meeting with the "ghost." To him, however, Tom and Joe listened with but scant attention. Their dislike of Dixon had grown to a point where it was difficult even to pretend politeness to him.

"Humph!" uttered Joe, when the two men had gone inside the bungalow.

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"That's your opinion of Dixon's yarn, is it?" demanded Halstead.

"He's either lying, or dreaming," proclaimed young Dawson, bluntly.

"I'd like to find out which," muttered Captain Tom, "though I can guess, already. Joe, old fellow, you don't say much, but I'm fast learning to pin to your judgments of people. You didn't like Dixon from the first moment he showed himself on board the 'Restless,' did you?"

"I don't believe I enthused over him," grimaced Dawson.

"Dixon couldn't really be responsible for the Ghost of Alligator Swamp, could he?" demanded Tom Halstead, suddenly.

After that abrupt query both boys were silent for a while as they trudged about the grounds together.

"No," decided Joe, at last. "It isn't at all likely, for, according to Ham Mockus, and also according to some of the white people we talked with in Tres Arbores, the Ghost of Alligator Swamp has been doing business for the last three years, at least."

Twice more around the house they went. Tom, thinking deeply, at last burst forth:

"Joe, I'm going to do just what Dixon did. I'm going into the woods yonder, and see

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whether *I* can have the luck to encounter that big white spook."

Joe Dawson halted, peering queerly into his chum's face.

"Tom, you don't mean that!"

"Yes, I do."

"But the risk? I don't mean the spook. You'd like only too well to meet that, I know. I mean the snakes. In a country as full of rattlers as this section is, it's mighty dangerous to go stepping about through the woods on a dark night."

"Dixon braved 'em, didn't he?" challenged Tom Halstead, defiantly.

"He only says he did, remember. My idea is that he didn't go very far into the woods."

"Well—I'm going," said Tom, deliberately, after a thoughtful pause.

"Be careful, then, old fellow!"

Joe, who seldom said much, and who rarely did anything demonstrative, reached out his hand, gripping Halstead's.

"I'm wishing myself good luck," laughed Halstead, over his shoulder, as he started away. "If I'm gone a goodish while, don't worry. And remember that your post is guarding the house!"

Joe Dawson felt a sense of almost unaccountable uneasiness steal over him as his straining eyes watched his chum slowly vanish into the

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gloom, and then finally disappear under the shadows of the trees at the edge of the forest.

"I wonder if I ought to have kept him back?" chafed Joe Dawson, again and again, as he trudged vigilantly around the bungalow, pausing to peer off into the darkness whenever he came around to the side from which Skipper Tom Halstead had departed.

Joe became more worried every moment. Yet the time slipped by. From the forest came not a sound or a sign of any kind. At last the first pale streaks of dawn appeared.

"Say!" muttered Joe, almost angrily, halting to glare off at the forest. "What on earth is Tom doing—taking a nap under the trees?"

Daylight became more pronounced. Surely, there could be no harm in leaving the yard for a moment or two—now. Joe darted into the bungalow, up the stairs, and into the room where Jeff Randolph slept.

"Come, get up!" commanded Dawson, energetically. "Get a gun and come down by the door. Tom Halstead is missing, and I've got to go after him."

Though Jeff was, at first, inclined to resent the arousing, as soon as he understood what was in the wind the Florida boy tumbled off his cot in lively fashion and began to pull on his clothes.

"Anything up, Dawson?" softly called Henry

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Tremaine, poking his head through the doorway of his bedroom.

"Tom Halstead went into the woods, and hasn't come back," quivered Joe. "I'm going to look for him."

"Don't stir until I get down below," called Henry Tremaine, sharply. "I'll be there in a minute and a fraction."

Nor did Joe Dawson have to wait long ere Henry Tremaine, with hunting rifle in hand, bounded out from the house, followed by Oliver Dixon.

"Dixon will stand on guard here, while the rest of us go into the woods," declared Tremaine. "Now, lead on quickly, the way you saw Halstead go."

Off at a quick run started Joe Dawson. They entered the woods, spreading out in a line as they went.

"Here—everybody!" yelled Henry Tremaine, within two minutes. His hail brought Joe and Jeff to him on the jump.

"Look at the ground here," cried the owner of the bungalow, hoarsely. "There's been a struggle here."

"And good old Tom was in it!" panted Joe, making a dive for the ground, then holding up one of the brass uniform buttons bearing the monogram of the Motor Boat Club.

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The three discoverers stood staring blankly at one another for the next few seconds.

"See if there's a trail—look about for it," commanded Tremaine, himself beginning to search about over the ground.

"Here's the start of one," called Jeff, presently. "And now it dies out. Hunters of the Everglades, I reckon, were the men who did this trick. They know how to cover trails. Yet perhaps they've given us a clue, for the trail, as it starts, heads toward the water."

Feverishly these startled ones pressed on to the lake's edge. As they came down to the water they saw no craft out yonder—nothing but the morning mist over the surface of the lake and the many small islands visible from where they stood.

"Great Scott!" roared Joe. "Look at the pier! The launch is gone—taken from under our very noses!"

It did not require a second look to make sure that the motor boat was, indeed, gone!

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CHAPTER XII

WHAT BEFELL THE YOUNG SKIPPER

MINDFUL of the danger from rattlers, which makes the section near the Everglades a dangerous one to travel by night, Tom Halstead proceeded into the forest with great caution.

Every here and there, too, were boggy bits of land in which the feet would sink.

So much care did his choice of path need that the motor boat skipper did not have time to give much heed to anything else.

"Hss-sst!"

That sharp, yet low, sound came to his ears before he had been engaged ten minutes in exploring the dark forest.

Halstead halted instantly, gooseflesh beginning to come out over him, for his first thought was that he was nearing one of the dreaded rattlesnakes.

"Oh, pshaw!" he muttered to himself, after a moment. "Rattlers don't hiss; they rattle. It must be I imagined that sound."

Once more he started forward.

"Hss-sst!"

Again the youthful skipper stopped dead

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short, this time feeling less startled, though he became, if possible, more alert.

"That isn't a ghostly noise, either, even if there were such a thing as a ghost," the boy muttered inwardly. "I must be getting close to the makers of the noises. Confound this darkness!"

Tom stood quite still, peering in the direction from which he fancied the slight noise had come.

Suddenly Tom Halstead felt himself seized from behind. There was no time to cry out ere he pitched violently forward on his face, which was instantly buried in the soft grass of a bog. At least two men were a-top of him. Barely had he struck the ground when the young skipper felt the hunting rifle torn from his grasp.

Powerful hands gripped at his throat, the while his hands were yanked behind him and bound. Then he was rolled over onto his back. The grip about his throat was continued until his mouth had been forced open and filled with a big handful of the hanging moss that grows so picturesquely on Florida trees. This was swiftly and deftly made fast in place by a cord forced between his teeth and passed around his head.

"Now, I reckon the young cub can be yanked onto his feet," came in a low, cool voice from one of the assailants.

Tom Halstead was brought up onto his feet

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with a jerk. At last, he was able to see all his captors as well as the almost total darkness permitted.

Two of them were white men, in ragged jeans and wearing coarse woolen jackets and nondescript caps. The other two men were negroes; if possible they looked more ragged than their white companions. All seemed to be between the ages of thirty and forty.

"Whew! But this is a hard-looking crowd," reflected young Halstead, as coolly as he could. "So this is the composite Ghost of Alligator Swamp? Humph! I've found the ghost, but I wish it were under better circumstances!"

"This yere," whispered one of the white pair, to his companions, "is the one we want—the fellow that's captain of the yacht down in Oyster Bay."

"Now, why on earth do they want *me,* especially, and *how* on earth do they recognize me so easily?" wondered Tom Halstead, with a new start.

"We'se right glad t' see yo', suh!" remarked the other white man, with an evil grin. "So glad we won't even trouble yo' to walk. Jabe, I reckon yo' can carry the young gentleman. Pick him up."

Humming softly, the more stalwart negro of the pair clasped Halstead around the waist,

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easily raising the helpless boy to one of his broad shoulders.

"Don' make no trail, now," warned one of the whites who appeared to be the leader, as he led the way carrying Halstead's captured rifle.

Their path took them down straight to the water's edge. From there they worked around to the pier, which, in the darkness, was not visible from the front of the bungalow.

"Thanks to the pair o' oahs in this yere boat I reckon we can borrow it," observed the leader, in a low tone. "Jabe, put ouah passenger in the bow o' the boat an' set close by him. We can't have him lettin' out no yells."

After Tom had been disposed of in the bottom of the boat—Jabe unconcernedly resting one foot on the body of the prostrate prisoner—the others got in cautiously.

Casting off, one of the white men and one of the negroes possessed themselves of an oar each. With these they noiselessly shoved off into deeper water, after which they took to sculling softly. Thus they went along until they had placed the first of the little islands between themselves and the bungalow. Now, the other pair took oars and began to row in earnest. The oars were always kept in the boat for use in case the motor should break down. The boat was a heavy, cumbersome thing to row, but these men

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seemed possessed of enormous strength. By the time that daylight began to creep into the eastern sky, some three miles down the lake had been covered.

"Now, I reckon we can staht the motor a little bit, anyway," observed the leader of these rascals. "Ef we run easy fo' a few miles, then we'll be fah enough away so that ouah noise won't be heard from Marse Tremaine's house, anyway."

As soon as the oars had been shipped this fellow bent over the motor. It was evident that he knew something about starting such an engine, for he soon had the motor running all but noiselessly and carrying the boat along at more than four miles an hour. One of the negroes had taken the wheel.

"An houah of this," chuckled the leader, "and I reckon we can go at the fullest kind o' speed—straight for the Evahglades."

As he could not speak, Tom Halstead had been putting in his time with the liveliest kind of thinking, while he silently watched his captors.

"I guess I can place these chaps without the aid of a directory," thought the motor boat captain savagely. "When white men mix with negroes, in Florida, they're a pretty poor sort of white men. This whole gang must belong to the class of fugitives from the law that flee to the

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Everglades when they can get ahead of the police officers. They're a desperate gang, out for any kind of plunder, stopping at few crimes."

Not a little had young Halstead read of these outlaws of the Everglades. Since reaching Florida he had heard much more of them. In these vast, desolate stretches of swamp land there are a multitude of trackless ways. Once a criminal, fleeing from justice, gets two or three miles into the Everglades, he is almost certain to remain a free man as long as he stays there. In all these vast reaches of swamp and dark waters, with every advantage in favor of the hiding criminal, the officer of the law, if he pursues, has a very little chance of ever finding his quarry.

Florida police officers are not cowards. The men of Florida are brave. Yet officers have been known to pursue fugitive criminals into the Everglades and never come out again. Those who do get out alive often have a tale to tell of days or weeks of patient search through the gloomy, swampy fastnesses without ever once having caught sight of the men they sought.

When a criminal in southern Florida escapes with his booty, and is seen no more, the officers are wont to shake their heads and say:

"He has hiked it into the Everglades."

Which is as good as saying that the criminal

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is where he can't be found or tracked, and that he is safe from the law unless he should take it into his head to come out once more into the communities. Nor is it necessary for these men to return to the haunts of civilization, unless they wish to do so. Crops may be raised in these hidden fastnesses, and wild animals may be shot for meat and clothing. Yet it is the nature of mankind to yearn for a return to old haunts. So every now and then a fugitive from the Everglades is caught, though rarely or never in the Everglades themselves.

"A nice crowd I'm with, and a fine chance I've got ever to get back to my friends!" was the thought that rushed, with swift alarm, through Tom Halstead's brain. "And it was plain they *did* want me. They were looking for me, more than for anyone else. *But why?*"

The more Halstead racked his brain for the answer the more puzzled he became.

"Of course, Oliver Dixon might want me out of the way; undoubtedly he does. Yet he had no acquaintance with these ruffians. Dixon is as much of a stranger to this section as any of the rest of us."

Then, at last, came the stunning thought:

"Jupiter! Dixon claims he met something that looked like a ghost! Was that all a lie? Did he go alone into the woods, and call so con-

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vincingly that he brought some of these scoundrels to him? Did he pay them to take me away? Were his story and his wild shots, his scared looks and his wild talk all parts of a monstrous lie?"

Tom Halstead throbbed with agony as he became more and more sure in his own mind that he had solved the mystery of his abduction by these wretches of the Everglades.

If he had not solved the puzzle correctly, then he could think of no other explanation that seemed at all plausible.

"And I determined to investigate Dixon's story for myself, and went right out into the forest—right out into the very trap set for me!" muttered the young motor boat skipper, trembling with rage and disgust. "Oh, what an impulsive, hot-headed fool I was! How Oliver Dixon will shake with inward laughter at finding me just the idiot he expected me to be!"

So utterly angry was he with himself that Halstead did himself injustice. It is doubtful if Dixon was clever enough to have planned it all just as it had happened. It had been a chance—a lucky one for Dixon—that had placed Tom Halstead in this terrible situation.

As the boat swept along under increased speed the four men regaled themselves on food that they drew from their various pockets. Halstead

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felt a ravenous gnawing under his belt, but none of his captors offered him anything to eat.

"There ain't grub enough to throw any of it away, younker," observed the leader, as he swept the last crumbs into his own mouth. "But I reckon maybe yo' would like some use o' yo' mouth. Jabe, take that packing out from between the younker's teeth."

This service the negro performed, rather roughly, it is true. But at last Tom Halstead could take a really deep breath; he could talk, if he so desired; but he was in no mood to do that.

The young skipper knew that the boat was now traveling rapidly, though he could not see above the gunwale of the craft. From the actions of these Everglades ruffians, however, the boy knew that they did not sight any other boats. Thus the forenoon wore along until, at last, the leader, whom the others addressed as "Sim," remarked:

"Jabe, yo' may as well let the younker set up on a seat, now. He-un won't try to jump ovahbo'd. If he-un does, so much the easier fo' us."

"Let him have his hands?" inquired the bulky negro.

"Yep; might jest as well."

So the bonds were removed from the young skipper's wrists. He accepted this favor in sul-

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len silence, then raised himself to one of the seats.

"Thought yo' might like to see the country yo' are goin' into," vouchsafed Sim, with a grin.

As Tom Halstead glanced about him he saw that Lake Okeechobee was behind them. The boat was now running along, at a speed reduced to some six miles an hour, on a gloomy-looking lagoon not more than forty feet wide. Just ahead of them were great, gaunt cypress trees, laden with hanging moss, that almost met over the water.

"We don' brag none erbout the scen'ry heah," observed Sim, "but it's a good, safe country in the Evahglades. Plenty o' snakes an' 'gators heah, but we-uns is used to 'em. Evah eat a 'gator steak?"

"No," answered Halstead, shortly.

"Likely ernuff yo' will, in the months to come," asserted Sim. "An' it's a powahful good rifle yo' brought to us. We-uns was out o' cartridges but now we done got some 'at will fix 'gators all right."

A mile further on they came to broader waters, a sort of swamp lake that was at least a quarter of a mile wide. Through the windings of this body they traversed for three or four miles, the water at last narrowing, until the waterway was barely more than wide enough or deep enough

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to allow the handling of the boat. Yet Sim managed it remarkably well.

"I reckon this yere boat is goin' to be powahful handy to us, after this," the leader laughed. "We-uns sho'ly can get away fast ef anyone tries to chase us 'cross Okeechobee."

They came, now, to a larger space of water, at one side of which lay an island many acres in extent. It was well-covered with trees and dense jungle. Toward a little bay in this island Sim headed the launch, gradually slowing down the speed. Presently he stopped and gently beached the boat.

"Home!" he laughed, as he sprang out. "Come on, younker. I'm real anxious to know what yo' think of ouah own little place in the heart o' the Evahglades."

"I've been in places I'd enjoy seeing more," declared Halstead, as he stepped ashore, glad to stretch his legs. "You don't seem to have even a house here."

"Oh, but we have," chuckled Sim. "Yet, as we-uns wouldn't care to have 'gator hunters find it, the house is back in the jungle. Now, younker, make yo'se'f as much at home heah as yo' can. Enjoy life all yo' can, but don't try any trick of getting out o' sight o' the gentleman that has yo' in charge. Kink, I reckon yo' can take the gun and watch ovah this young gentleman while we-

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uns goes up to the house and does some o' the chores."

"Kink," one of the negroes, received the rifle and box of cartridges with a grin.

"Yo' set right down there," commanded Sim, pointing to a grassy hummock. "Don't go to provoke Kink, 'cause he's nervous when he-un done totes a gun!"

Tom seated himself as ordered, while Kink stationed himself watchfully twenty feet away.

"How long are you folks going to keep me here a prisoner?" demanded Halstead, as the other three turned to go into the interior of the island.

"How long?" repeated Sim, turning and looking back. "Why, suh, I don' reckon yo' ever goin' to git away from heah. Not alive, anyway!"

CHAPTER XIII

HENRY TREMAINE RUSHES THE VOODOO

NO sooner had the discovery been made that the launch was gone, and the full significance of the fact realized, than Henry Tremaine declared, decisively:

"We must get the ladies up at once. There's mischief afloat. We've got to be wide awake for everything that may happen. Halstead gone!

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Good heavens! One can only guess his fate! Back to the house— quick!"

Almost immediately the entire household was astir, and ready for whatever might happen.

"I done tole yo'-all dat ole Okeechobee ain' no fit place to be," wailed Ham, who refused to believe anything but that Tom Halstead had been snatched up and borne away through the air by the dreaded ghost.

"It's four days before the men are due to come back with the wagons," said Mr. Tremaine. "Jeff, you know all the paths of this section?"

"Yes, suh."

"You can get to the nearest settlement? How long will it take?"

"About three hours and a half, suh, the kind of going we have hereabouts."

"You can get at least a dozen armed men and bring them back with you—men of real nerve, who won't be afraid to fight, if they're well paid for it?"

"Yes, suh. I can get the men all right, suh. But——"

Jeff glanced longingly backward at the house.

"Oh, of course," exclaimed Mr. Tremaine. "You want something in the way of breakfast before you start on a tramp of hours. Ham, you rascal, hustle inside and get your fire going. Put on coffee, bacon, eggs—hustle. Jeff

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will go faster if he starts with steam up. And, Jeff, be sure to carry extra food with you. Dixon, you stay out here, if you will. The rest of us will go inside and all turn to helping Ham rush things."

Things were quickly bustling inside the bungalow.

Ida, as she hurried about, pallid-faced, allowed a tear or two to glisten in her fine eyes. Had Dixon been there to see, he would have boiled with rage at Tom Halstead.

"My dear," asked Mrs. Tremaine, nervously, "if Captain Halstead ran into danger in the night, and was spirited away, how can you feel at all sure that as much won't happen to Jeff after he starts? Hadn't you better send some one with him?"

"Yes," decided Tremaine, after a moment's thought. "Dixon must go, for it wouldn't be fair to send Joe Dawson. *He* will naturally want to be right here to have the first word of his chum."

"What do you think can have happened to Tom Halstead?" inquired Ida.

"From the launch being gone," answered Tremaine, "it is almost a certainty that a gang of Everglades skulkers have carried him off. They'd know only one place to retreat to—the heart of the Everglades."

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"Are you going to follow there?" asked Mrs. Tremaine.

"The instant we get outside help," replied Mr. Tremaine, crisply. "I'll leave Dixon, Ham and three or four of the natives on guard here. I'll head all the rest on a rush expedition into the Everglades, and Joe and Jeff shall go with me."

"Is there a really good chance of finding Halstead, if he has been taken into the Everglades?" asked Ida, anxiously, turning to Jeff Randolph.

"Just about one fightin' chance in twenty," replied Jeff, candidly. "I've heard of officers searchin' fo' a month in the Evahglades, an' then coming out stumped fo' shuah. But we're goin' to hope fo' bettah luck this time."

In a very short space of time a steaming breakfast was ready. Jeff seated himself to eat with Mr. Dixon, everyone else wanting to wait on them. As rapidly as they could they stuffed their breakfast away. As they rose, Ham brought cold food which the Florida boy and the Northern man stuffed into some of their pockets.

"Take a rifle, Jeff—plenty of cartridges," directed Henry Tremaine. "You, too, Oliver." Then, followed by low but intense cheers, young Randolph and his companion started on their way over the rough trail to the nearest little village.

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Not much later the others seated themselves at breakfast, though excitement ran high enough to interfere a good deal with appetite. It being broad daylight, no outside watch was kept, though the remaining rifles of the party were laid within handy reach in the living room.

"Now, we've settled one thing, by the aid of our experiences," announced Henry Tremaine, as he took the cup of coffee passed him. "We know the Ghost of Alligator Swamp to be nothing but a crude myth."

"If you've solved the riddle, how do you explain the so-called ghost?" questioned Ida Silsbee, eagerly.

"Why, just this way," responded Tremaine, as he cut into a strip of bacon. "Forty miles to the south of us the Everglades begin in earnest. It is well known to everyone in Florida that the Everglades shelter and screen probably scores of desperafe criminals. Some of these gangs are engaged in running off with horses or mules. They get these stolen animals into the Everglades, and, after months, drive them out to some other part of the state, easily disposing of their booty.

"Burglars, especially black ones, loot a house by night, then travel fast until they reach the Everglades with their loot. They remain there until they think all has blown over. Then they

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send one of their number out with the plunder, to dispose of it in one of the cities and bring back some of the necessities of civilization that human beings crave.

"Other rascals who take to the Everglades are those who have taken human life, and flee to where they know the police will have very little chance of getting them. So, the Everglades may contain a great many gangs of desperate characters."

"But how does that account for the ghost?" Ida insisted. "Why should such men seek to scare the wits out of a party like ours?"

"In the hope that we'd flee from this accursed spot as soon as daylight came," responded Tremaine, with the positiveness of conviction.

"But what good, my dear, would it do to have a party like ours run away?" inquired Mrs. Tremaine, wonderingly.

"Why, we came here rather well supplied with fine provisions, didn't we?" demanded Tremaine. "Now, if we were to run away without waiting for wagons, the gang behind the ghostly disturbances would find a goodly store of food in this house, wouldn't they? And just the kind of food that these hungry wretches of the Everglades would prize highly. Also, if we fled in haste, we would have to leave much of our wardrobe behind. These fellows who rarely get to

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civilized communities must find *some* way of supplying themselves with clothing. Then, besides, if we ran away, we might even forget to take with us such valuables as we may happen to have here with us. So, all in all, a gang of desperate characters from the Everglades would find this house rather rich picking if we went away in haste as a result of a big fright."

"I'm sure you've guessed the motives behind the ghost scares," nodded Ida Silsbee. "And I can even understand why such men would find it worth while to steal the launch and run it into the Everglades. Yet why should they take that splendid young fellow, Tom Halstead, with them?"

"Unless to make him run the launch," suggested Mrs. Tremaine.

Joe Dawson flushed, shaking his head.

"Tom couldn't be made to help the scoundrels," he declared, vigorously. "He'd die sooner than be driven into helping such villains!"

"Of course," mused Henry Tremaine, "it's more than barely possible that the wretches figured I'd pay a ransom to have Halstead set at liberty again."

"Den' 'scuse me, sah, but yo' don't believe it's a real graveyahd ghos' dat ha'nts dis country, and dat can trabble even out to sea on a gale?"

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Ham Mockus, who had been standing in the room unnoticed, put this question.

"Why, of course we don't any of us believe that, Ham," retorted the owner of the bungalow, with a smile.

"Den yo' find a powahful lot o' folks dat knows mo' dan yo' do erbout it, sah. 'Scuse me, sah."

"Men and women who think they know anything about the Ghost of Alligator Swamp are the victims of their own imaginations and of children's tales, Ham," laughed Henry Tremaine. Then he added, with ugly emphasis:

"Before we get through with this business, I intend to see this much-talked-about and nonsensical ghost laid by the heels! I'll spend a lot of money, and hire a lot of men to help me, before I'll give up the pursuit of this sham ghost! You stay here, Ham, and you'll see the ghost in handcuffs!"

Ham Mockus, however, declined to be fooled by any such talk as this. After remaining respectfully silent for some moments, the colored steward opened his mouth to remark:

"Ah done reckun, sah, de bes' t'ing yo' can do, sah, will be to send someone to fin' ole Uncle Tobey an' tote him heah."

"Who's Uncle Tobey?" demanded Mr. Tremaine, removing his cigar from his mouth.

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"Ole voodoo doctah, sah, an' a right clevah old colored pusson, sah."

"Voodoo doctor, eh? Witch charmer? Dealer in spells and all that sort of rubbish, eh?" questioned Henry Tremaine, sharply. "Ham, do you think I believe in any such truck as that? Uncle Tobey, eh? Humph!"

"But Uncle Tobey done chahm dat ghos' away from some odder folks—Ah done heah dat much down at Tres Arbores," asserted Ham, solemnly.

"From folks that came up here to the lake?" asked Tremaine, sharply.

"Yassuh. From folks that done hab a house down at de wes' side ob de lake."

"Those people paid Uncle Tobey for a spell, and were troubled no more by the ghost?"

"Dat's a fac', sah, w'ut Ah'm tellin' yo'," Ham asserted, solemnly.

"Hm!" mused Henry Tremaine, a shrewd look coming into his eyes.

The colored steward soon afterward went back into the kitchen to eat his own breakfast. The white folks of the party remained in the living-room talking over the puzzling happenings of the night.

Presently Ham came back into the room as though moving on springs. On his face there was a look of vast importance.

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" 'Scuse me, sah. Yassuh. But I'se done gotter tell yo' dat dere's a mos' impohtant visitor heah. Yassuh."

"A visitor?" demanded Henry Tremaine, looking his colored steward over keenly.

"Yassuh! Yassuh! De man dat can he'p us moh'n anyone else in de whole worl'. Yassuh. He jest fotch up at de kitchen do'. It's ole Uncle Tobey, de greates' voodoo doctah dat eber was. Yassuh."

"By Jove, I'll see him," muttered Henry Tremaine, leaping up.

"Yassuh! Ah done know yo' would, fo' shuah," whispered Ham Mockus, keeping right at the elbow of his employer, as Tremaine strode toward the kitchen. "But be mos' kahful to treat Uncle Tobey wid great respec'," admonished Ham. "I done tole yo', Marse Tremaine, ole Uncle Tobey, he-um de greates' voodoo in de worl'. Ef yo' make him mad, sah, den yo' teeth all gwine ter drop out, all yo' frien's die, yo' hab bad luck forebber an'——"

Henry Tremaine paused long enough in the kitchen to survey the cunning-faced old darkey who stood near the door. Uncle Tobey looked old enough to have spent a hundred years in this world. He was a thin, bent, gaunt and ragged old man whose keen eyes looked supernaturally brilliant.

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"So you're Uncle Tobey?" demanded Henry Tremaine, briskly.

"Yassuh!" replied the shrivelled little old caller.

"You're the voodoo?"

"Yassuh."

"You can quiet the Ghost of Alligator Swamp?"

"Yassuh."

"How do you know you can?"

"Ah has done it befo', sah—when folks done pay me well ernuff fo' it," grinned Uncle Tobey, cunningly.

"Well, we haven't minded the ghost so much," went on Henry Tremaine. "But last night your ghost took away one of our brightest young men."

"Yassuh. Ah know," admitted Uncle Tobey. "Ole Unc Tobe done know ebberyt'ing w'ut done happen, sah."

"How did you know it?" demanded Tremaine, with unwonted sharpness.

"W'y sah, all de birds ob de air done tote news to ole Unc Tobe," asserted the aged negro, solemnly.

"Dat's a fac'. Yassuh. Yassuh," insisted Ham.

"Can you restore that young man to us, Tobey?" questioned Tremaine.

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"Yassuh. Ef yo' done pay me well fo' it."

"How much?"

Uncle Tobey advanced upon his questioner, raising his head up to whisper in Tremaine's ear:

"T'ree t'ousan' dollahs, sah—real money in mah hand. Ef yo' don' wanter to do it, den de young man, Marse Halstead, he-um done shuah die!"

"Nonsense!" scoffed the owner of the bungalow. "That's more money than anyone ever pays a voodoo. Man, I'll give you twenty dollars when young Halstead walks in on us. Not a cent more."

"Yo'll pay me de whole sum, sah, or yo'll neber see de young marse ergin," declared Uncle Tobey, in another whisper.

Henry Tremaine suddenly shot out his right hand, gripping the old voodoo's arm tightly.

"You're in with the Everglades gang, Tobey! That's what you are. Ham! This old fellow doesn't get away from us until officers come to take him. I've laid by the heels a big part of the ghost!"

But Ham Mockus had fled in speechless terror.

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CHAPTER XIV

TOM HALSTEAD, STRATEGIST

A FORBIDDING countenance was that worn by black Mr. Kink.

He belonged to the worst species of shiftless, vagrant Southern darkey. He was as different from the respectable, dependable house negro as a stormy night is from a fair one. Kink had served many terms in jail ere he gained enough in the wisdom of his kind to take to the trackless wastes of the Everglades. The fellow's face was scarred from many a brawl. He seldom laughed; when he did, it was in cruelty.

Kink was slighter, and far less powerful than Jabe, though he possessed far more of wiry agility than the other negro.

"Ah jes' done hope yo' make a move dat yo' hadn't done oughter," he muttered, scowling at young Halstead, then fingering the rifle meaningly.

"Make your mind easy," retorted Captain Tom. "I've no notion for laying myself liable to a rifle bullet."

"Ef yo' jes' gib me one 'scuse," glowered Kink.

As if to settle the fact that he did not intend

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to do anything of the sort the motor boat captain half-closed his eyes, studying the ground.

Yet, not for a moment did Halstead cease to hope that he might find a way out of this predicament. Only one black man—one rifle—and that capable little motor launch tied so close at hand!

Presently Kink rested the butt of the rifle briefly on the ground while from one of his pockets he drew forth an old corn-cob pipe and a pinch of coarse tobacco grown in the Everglades. No sooner did he have the pipe going than the negro, watchful all the while, picked up the hunting rifle once more.

"Pretty rank tobacco you have," observed Tom Halstead, though he tried to speak pleasantly.

"Best Ah can get in dis great swamp," growled Kink. "Yo' got any erbout yo' clo'es?"

"I don't smoke," Halstead replied.

"Umph!" growled Kink, as though his opinion of the boy had fallen several notches lower.

"Do you never get hold of any good tobacco from the outside world?" questioned Tom.

"Meanin' sto' tobacco?" suggested Kink.

"Yes."

"Sometimes," admitted Kink. "But not of'en, ob co'se."

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"How long since you've had a cigar?" asked Tom, with an appearance of pleasant interest.

"Real cigar, made ob sto' tobacco?" demanded Kink.

"Yes."

"Lemme see. Well, it must been a yeah, now."

"Too bad," muttered the boy, half-pityingly.

"Oh, Ah could git er sto' cigar," volunteered Kink, scowling blackly.

"How?"

"By going' to a sto', ob co'se. Den yo' know w'ut happen?"

"What?" demanded Tom.

"W'ite fo'ks, dey done tie er rope 'roun' mah neck an' stretch it. Yassuh. Yo' see, I'm a plumb bad niggah," Kink added, with a strong touch of pride. "W'ite fo'ks down 'round' de bay, dey t'ink Ah'm good fo' nothin' but hang up. Wi'te fo'ks powahful 'fraid ob Kink!"

"As soon as I am really missed there'll be a lot of white folks down this way, I reckon," began Tom. "You see——"

Then, purposely, he paused. For a few seconds he looked as though he were trying to conceal his thought. Next he peered, as though covertly, northward under the trees.

When he saw Kink regarding him, Tom Halstead pretended to look wholly at the ground.

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Presently, however, he raised his glance to peer once more northward. So stealthy did the motor boat boy seem about the whole transaction that Kink, accustomed to being hunted through the Everglades, found himself peering, also, in the direction from which chase would come.

The first time he glanced, Kink turned again, almost immediately. But Halstead was sitting in the same place, so motionless and innocent, that the negro ventured another and longer look to the northward in the hope of seeing that which had appeared to give the boy such keen pleasure.

Like a flash, now, though noisless as a cat, Tom Halstead leaped to his feet. Before Kink had thought of turning, the young skipper launched himself through the air.

He struck Kink a blow that sent that fellow sprawling. Like a panther in the spring, Halstead bore his enemy to the ground, striking savagely while he wrested the rifle from the negro.

"Now, not a sound out of *you!*" warned Halstead, cocking the rifle and holding the muzzle not many inches from the fellow's head. "Are you going to be good?" he demanded, in a cool voice that was threatening in its very quietness.

"Yassuh!" admitted Kink, in a whisper.

"Then don't get up, unless I tell you to, and

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don't make a sound of any kind," warned Skipper Tom, standing before the sitting negro. "First of all, take that box of cartridges out of your pocket, and toss it a little distance away from you."

The late guard obeyed. Tom, still keeping the fellow under close watch, recovered the cartridges.

"Now, you get down to the boat," commanded Halstead. "Don't make any noise and don't ask any questions. There, that's right. Halt. Now, in the locker under your hand, you'll find some cord. Pull it out."

As the negro obeyed, Tom ordered him to lie face downward on the ground, next putting his hands together behind his back. Picking up the cord, Halstead made a noose at one end. This he slipped over Kink's crossed hands. Drawing the noose tight, he next knelt on the negro's back, rapidly lashing the hands ere the fellow could make any movement to wrench himself free.

"Remember what I said about making a noise," warned Tom. Going to the same locker he took out a quantity of engineer's waste—an excellent stuff for making a gag. Some of this he forced into the black man's mouth, making it fast with cord. All that remained was to knot the fellow's ankles together just loosely

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enough so that he could barely walk, yet could not run.

"Now, onto your feet with you, my man," muttered Halstead, raising him. "Now, over into the boat with you. Gently. Lie down out of sight. And bear in mind, if I get a sight of your head above the gunwale until I'm in the boat, it'll be all up with you!"

Kink's eyes rolled until only the whites could be seen. This black captive understood very well who had the upper hand.

Now, Tom turned his attention to untying the bowline.

"Kink! Ah say, Kink, yo' black rascal!"

It was the voice of Jabe calling. The very sound made Halstead shiver, at first.

"Kink, Ah say! Kain't yo' heah me?"

"Oo-oo-oo-ee!" shrilled Tom, knowing that to speak would be to betray himself.

Then back toward the jungle stole the motor boat boy, close up to the point where a barely distinguishable path ran through. Here he dropped to one knee, holding the rifle to his shoulder.

"Kink, yo'——"

Jabe, coming through the bushes just then, stopped short, blinking fast, his knees trembling and knocking together.

"You know just what is in the wind," warned

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Tom's low voice. "I've only to pull the trigger of this gun. Now, get ahead of me and march, without tricks!"

Caught like this, looking straight down into the muzzle of a gun behind which was a pale, resolute face, Jabe allowed himself to show the white feather. He marched, as ordered, throwing himself on his face close by the bow of the launch.

With Jabe Tom Halstead repeated the tactics he had employed against Kink, though he took pains to make the lashings and the knots doubly secure. Then Jabe, bound and gagged, and with but bare freedom of action for his feet, was helped over into the launch beside his friend.

"Now, you two start any kind of motion or sound, if you want to see just what a sailor would do under such circumstances," warned Halstead, in a low, dry tone.

With the rifle still cocked, he stood up, for an instant, to plan just what his next move should be.

"'Two out of the four!" he chuckled inwardly. "Fine! What wouldn't I give to have the white pair in the same fix! Careful, Tom, old fellow! Don't get rash. Try to get away from here while you've the chance!"

He was about to step into the launch, when he heard steps not far away. Someone else was

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coming through the jungle. Halstead's heart beat rapidly, his color coming and going swiftly.

"That's likely to be Sim and the other fellow, coming together," he muttered. "I can't get the launch away before they'll be here. Yet the two together—how on earth can I handle 'em? For I couldn't shoot either in cold blood."

Yet something had to be done, and with great speed. So the motor boat boy slipped back up to the beginning of the path through the jungle. Barely thirty seconds later Jig Waters, Sim's white comrade, stepped boldly through into the open.

Right then and there, however, Jig's boldness forsook him.

"Hold on, thar! I'm all yo's!" stammered Jig, softly, holding up his hands. He, too, was marched down to the water's edge and served precisely as the negroes had been.

"Three!" throbbed Tom Halstead. "Oh, if I could only stow away all four and take 'em back to civilization with me!"

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CHAPTER XV

THE WHOLE BAG OF GAME

THE daring quality of the idea made Tom Halstead tremulous.

He longed to return to the head of Lake Okeechobee with such a "noble" bag of game. Yet he was able to realize the risk that attended any such attempt.

"In reaching out for just one more," he told himself, palpitatingly, "I may lose the whole lot. Sim will be unquestionably the hardest of the crowd to subdue. No, no; I reckon I'd better be content with my good luck up to date."

Deciding thus, reluctantly, the young motor boat skipper prepared to cast off. It was his intention to get clear of the land by some little margin, then to start his gasoline motor with the least possible delay. He knew well enough that if Sim heard the motor going that big fellow was likely to come down to the water on the run.

"I've got all the menagerie I can train on the way back, anyway," muttered the boy, dryly.

Just at that moment he heard someone come, crashingly, through the jungle.

"Jupiter! I've got to get that last one, or

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lose all I've got—my own liberty included!" flashed through the boy's mind.

There was no help for it. Secretly half-glad, in his craze for more adventure, Tom stole swiftly, softly, across the open space.

"Now, you-all——" began Sim, in his loudest voice.

Just at that instant he stepped out of the jungle, then stopped, staring with all his might.

Right in front of him crouched young Halstead. Sim was looking down into the muzzle of the hunting rifle. To him it looked, just then, like the bore of a tunnel.

"Wha—wha—what?" exploded Sim.

"You guessed right, the first time," mocked Tom Halstead. "It's my move, now, not yours. Are you going to be troublesome?"

"Put down that gun, an' I'll talk with yo'," proposed Sim, hesitatingly.

"Instead, you put your hands up!" rang Halstead's crisp command.

"I——"

"If you don't——"

Tom backed three feet away, his eye looming up large as Sim caught a glimpse of it through the rifle-sights.

"You're going to be good, aren't you?" coaxed Tom, grimly. "If you are, you've only two seconds to decide. If you're not——"

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"I Reckon I'll Play; Show Me the Game."

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"I reckon I'll play," admitted Sim, hoarsely. "Show me how the game goes."

"Keep your hands up, and march, slowly, right on towards the boat," responded Tom Halstead. "Be ready for the word to halt, and do it the instant you hear me say so. If you try any tricks—but you won't!"

"No," promised Sim; "I won't."

"March, then—slowly."

Sim obeyed, also stopping when told. He lay down, with a dismal sigh, crossing his hands behind his back, just as told. From the boat came the sound of remonstrating kicks, the only method of communication that was left to Sim's own people.

"It may strike you," suggested Halstead, "that it will be an easy trick to turn and grapple with me when I get my hands on the cord. If you try it you're pretty likely to find that I'm prepared for you. You won't have even a fighting chance."

Kneeling on the back of the prostrate Sim the young skipper placed the rifle so that the muzzle rested against the back of the fellow's head.

"You see what will happen, if you make a move," proposed the boy.

"I reckon I ain't gwine to," observed Sim, huskily.

"Wise man! Now——!"

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Tom Halstead slipped a noose over those crossed hands. Then with the speed and skill of the sailor he rapidly crossed and wound, until he had Sim's hands very securely fastened. The knots were cleverly made fast in place. Few people except sailors can tie knots the way this boy tied them.

"Now, lie quiet just long enough for me to put a mild tackle on your ankles," admonished the young skipper.

When this was done he helped Sim to his feet.

"You can get into the boat, now," suggested Halstead.

"See here, boy, yo' can't git far away from heah afo' some o' my men git after yo'. Take yo' ole boat, an' leave me heah. That's the smartest way, I asshuah yo'."

"Get into the boat," ordered Tom, sternly. "I'll help you as soon as it's necessary."

When Sim got near enough to the gunwale to see the others so neatly stacked away he flew into a rage.

"Ef I done know yo' had the others like that," he stormed, "I'd have seen yo' further afo' I——"

"Get into the boat," interrupted Halstead, pressing the muzzle of the hunting rifle against Sim's back. "Now, over you go, with my help."

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Sim was talking in a picturesque way by this time, but Halstead, ignoring him, stacked him away with his comrades in the bow of the boat. Then, still gripping the rifle, the motor boat boy stepped aft, and started the motor. As soon as this was running smoothly, Halstead raised his voice, calling:

"I don't doubt that you fellows will soon feel tempted to squirm about and try to free yourselves. You don't know me, and might not believe me, so, if I see any signs of trouble, I'll have to let this rifle do my talking. If you doubt me, then try it on!"

Sim was the only one who could speak; *he* was too disgusted and wrathful to feel like saying a word.

Captain Tom swung on slow speed, guiding the boat by the rudder line that passed aft from the steering wheel.

Not knowing the waters here in the Everglades, and their almost inky blackness, under the shadows of the trees, concealing the depths, he was forced to go slowly.

All the while, too, with the rifle ready at hand, he had to keep a sharp lookout over the men stacked forward like so many logs. Their judgment, however, did not prompt them to move.

It seemed like ages to the boy ere he got clear of the Everglades. He thought he was follow-

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ing the route by which they had entered, yet his only general guide was to keep to a northerly course.

At last he saw the open waters of Lake Okeechobee ahead. As he drove the boat out into broader, deeper waters, a prayer of thankfulness went up from the boy.

Once in the lake, he crowded on speed, and was presently running at the full power of the little engine. Even if he could keep this gait, he had more than a three hours' trip ahead of him.

Now, however, after he had the motor running to suit him, he was free to give practically all of his attention to his "passengers" on this unique trip.

"I feel like complimenting you on your fine order up forward," chuckled the boy. "It may interest you to know that I am keeping my eye on the lot of you all the time."

Sim's answer wouldn't be worth repeating. Not one of the "passengers" lay so that he could look aft, a very decided advantage for the young skipper.

It was a fearfully long run. Late in the afternoon Halstead caught his first glimpse of Tremaine's bungalow at the head of the lake.

"I'll be there in twenty minutes, now," he glowed. "Won't there be fun when I show my load!"

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A few minutes later he made out figures of people running out of the bungalow. Plainly they had a glass, and were using it, for presently Tom saw them waving their arms wildly toward him.

"There's more than our own party there," muttered the boy, with a throb of gratitude. "That surely means they've been organizing an expedition to hunt for me."

Just as soon as he was near enough, Halstead sounded several blasts lustily on the whistle. There was more waving of arms from the crowd before the bungalow. Halstead fancied he caught the faintest sound of distant cheering. Bye-and-bye he was sure of it. Now, it was a duet between whistles and cheers. Joe, Jeff and Henry Tremaine were leading the others in a mad scramble to the end of the pier.

Then, with a final, long blast from the whistle, Tom Halstead ran in close, rising as he did so.

Putting both hands to his mouth, Skipper Tom shouted:

"Here, you, Ham!"

"Yassuh!" shouted Mockus, dancing two or three reel steps.

"This is your especial treat! Hog the first look for yourself. I'm bringing you, tied hand and foot, the Ghost of Alligator Swamp!"

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CHAPTER XVI

HAM PROMISES TO BE BRAVE HEREAFTER

IT was Joe Dawson, though, who caught the first glimpse of the "passengers" as the motor boat ran in closer, while Tom was busy with the motor.

"The ghost?" yelled Joe. "I should say so!"

Then everybody struggled for a look into the boat. Besides the Tremaine party there were fourteen Florida men whom Jeff had brought in from the nearest community. Two of them were peace officers.

"Ease off the bow, Joe, and get the bow line for yourself," grinned Tom. "But, say! Aren't they a handsome lot?"

A wild cheer went up from all hands.

The bow line was quickly made fast, after which Tom threw off a stern line, which Jeff caught and tied.

Then, amid a very babel of exclamations and questions, young Halstead stepped out onto the pier, Joe being the first to grip his hand.

Henry Tremiane secured the next chance, remarking, while his eyes twinkled mistily:

"Captain Halstead, I owe you an apology."

"For what, sir?"

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"For being so officious as to summon any help. But I admit that I didn't quite know you boys. I think I do, now."

"However it was done, it was splendid!" cried Ida Silsbee, eagerly, presenting her small, gloved hand to the young captain.

"Splendid? I never heard of anything like it!" uttered Dixon, as he, too, pressed forward, holding out his hand.

Both his speech and his act were for Ida's benefit. Oliver Dixon had the good sense to know that any slight offered the motor boat youth, at this time, would redound against his own chances as suitor with Miss Silsbee.

Tom took the Dixon hand limply, looking straight into the young man's eyes so searchingly that even the brazen Oliver had difficulty in maintaining anything like composure.

"I'll keep up the pretense with him," thought Halstead, "until I'm ready to unmask him."

"Captain Tom," exclaimed Oliver Dixon, eagerly, "you're a wonder—a twentieth century knight!"

Sim, at this moment, was being hauled out of the boat by three of the Florida men present. Sim's sullen, baleful eyes sought Dixon's, causing that young man to quail, though just at that instant none of the Tremaine party noted the episode.

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"Say, I reckon we know all these fellows," announced one of the local officers. "Sim and Jig are two of the worst men that ever got into the Everglades. We know enough, too, about Jabe and Kink to keep 'em busy fo' a long time explaining their records."

"Then you can take charge of them all as criminals wanted by the courts?" inquired Halstead.

"Yep; I reckon we can."

"Good enough, then; you can have 'em on the old charges, and I won't have to stay in Florida, forever and day, to be a witness."

"There is no use staying here," declared Henry Tremaine. "Bring prisoners and all up to the house. It's a lot more comfortable talking where there are chairs."

Joe walked on one side of his chum as they bent their steps away from the pier. To aggravate Oliver Dixon's jealous rage, Ida Silsbee also managed to keep close to the young skipper.

On the broad porch the four prisoners were lined up. Uncle Tobey was also brought out and added to them, the local officers being satisfied that the aged negro voodoo doctor had acted as a go-between for the gang.

"And this is the whole of the Ghost of Alligator Swamp, laid by the heels," chuckled Henry Tremaine, appreciatively.

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Then Tom, of course, had to tell the story of his strange adventure. He told it with extreme modesty, yet even the dullest account was bound to place him higher than ever in the estimation of all his hearers save Joe. Young Dawson had an opinion of his chum that nothing could increase.

The three who had been gagged were now allowed the use of their tongues, but did not abuse their privilege. Sim ordered them all to "shet up and keep shet," which advice they followed to the letter.

It was a big feeding contract that devolved upon the Tremaines. In the house, however, were plenty of provisions. With the help of some of the Florida men a meal big enough for all was prepared before dark. Even the prisoners were fed. Then the local visitors were ready to take the collective "ghost" to the nearest jail, many miles off through the forest. Henry Tremaine, however, after paying all liberally for their trouble, further engaged six of the natives to remain behind.

"For," he announced, "we came here to hunt alligators, and that's what we're going to do. Now, you six men can be towed by us in another boat when we go into the Everglades. The presence of such a party, armed, will be enough to keep any friends of the prisoners that may be

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lurking in the big swamp country from showing us any hostile attentions."

The evening was spent with some further accounts of Tom's trip into the Everglades. When it came time to retire it was decided to let the six Florida men stand guard over the bungalow, one at a time, through the night.

By daylight the entire party was up again. With the first glimpses of light the six Florida men had begun a further exploration of the country thereabouts. Two of them came upon the battered, though serviceable, old boat that Sim and his crew had evidently used. Some of the others found a covered hiding-place in the woods where the Everglades rascals had hidden much ghostly paraphernalia. Among this stuff was a jointed bamboo "ghost," covered with cotton cloth—the same thing that had frightened Ham Mockus so badly in the kitchen.

"Now, do you see what you were shivering about?" demanded Henry Tremaine, laughingly.

"Ah reckon Ah's done bin a plumb idiot," admitted Ham, shamefacedly.

"Not any bigger idiot than folks hereabouts have been during the last three years," rejoined Tremaine. "Nor any bigger idiot than people have always been, all over the world. But, Ham, my lad, take a bit of advice: whenever you

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hear of a sure-enough, really-and-truly ghost, just get out on its trail with a shot-gun. Don't lose any time shivering, and don't waste any time until you've brought that ghost into camp."

"No, sah, Ah won't," promised Ham, solemnly.

"He'll run and hide his head the very next moan he hears on a dark night," laughed Jeff Randolph.

"W'ut yo' talkin' erbout, Marse Jeff?" demanded Ham, with a show of indignation. "Jes' a plain, or'nary niggah?"

Dixon was on hand again, trying to be extremely pleasant to young Captain Halstead.

"I mustn't let him see that I suspect or know anything," thought Tom. "I musn't scare Dixon away from this party until I'm able to place Officer Randolph's story right under Henry Tremaine's nose."

"I'm very glad to see that you're so nice with young Halstead," Ida Silsbee found chance to remark to Oliver Dixon.

"Why shouldn't I be pleasant with him?" asked Dixon, pretending surprise.

"I was afraid you had take an unaccountable dislike to the boy."

"Much to the contrary," remarked the young man, smiling. "I always admire great pluck and an uncommon amount of brains."

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"All aboard for the alligator hunt! We haven't any time to lose in making the start," called Henry Tremaine, hurrying through the house.

CHAPTER XVII

IN THE CIRCLE OF 'GATORS!

AGAIN the December day was warm and bright, as the little launch glided over Lake Okeechobee.

The boat that had lately been used by Sim and his crew was now being towed astern. In it were four of the Florida men, the other two being in the launch itself. All of these Florida men were armed with their own rifles. Thus, with the Tremaine party itself, the host considered the expedition too strong to be in danger from any lurking criminals who led a fugitive existence in the Everglades.

By the time the launch and its tow reached the lower end of Lake Okeechobee it was a little past noon. Tremaine planned that they would rove through the Everglades until about four o'clock, then having enough daylight to return to the lake. The last of the run homeward could be safely made with the light furnished by the launch's bright running lights.

As they entered the black waters of this great

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swamp country Joe Dawson shut off most of the speed. At the same time the rowboat was cast off, for the men in that craft could now row as fast as the expedition would move.

"All talking must be done in low tones," warned Henry Tremaine. "Noise often chases the 'gators under water. We want to see if we can't bag two or three fine ones in the time we have left to us."

For an hour launch and rowboat cruised about without even a sight of one of the much-sought alligators.

"I'm afraid it's going to be a poor day's sport," muttered Tremaine, shaking his head.

"It's never a po' day's sport, suh, until we get back stumped," rejoined Jeff. "And we're right in the very paht of the Everglades where the best shooting has been found this yeah, suh."

Mrs. Tremaine settled back against cushions, turning the pages of a novel. *She* wasn't going to betray any excitement until big game got right in front of the rifles.

Oliver Dixon forgot to keep a very sharp look-out. Ida Silsbee was seated at his right hand. The young man was devoting all his energies to making himself as pleasant as possible.

"I must do all I can, in every way, to hasten the day when I can propose to her," the young

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man was thinking. "I shan't be easy until this girl is Mrs. Dixon. Her fortune is too large a one for me to miss. Such chances don't fall in my way every week."

He was glad, too, that Ida was not paying very much heed to Halstead. But Tom had no time for that. Between guiding the launch and keeping a sportsman's lookout, the young skipper was fully occupied. Jeff sat beside him, while Mr. Tremaine, rifle in hand, stood behind them much of the time, keeping a sharp eye on the water.

"There you are, sir," whispered sharp-eyed Halstead, jogging Mr. Tremaine's knee with his thrust-back left hand. "Just as far ahead as you can see, sir. Just beyond that point of land."

"Jove! you've got sharp vision," muttered Tremaine. "Oh, now I see it. Just the snout above water."

Joe, at a signal from his chum, shut off the speed, the launch slowly drifting while the rowboat closed in behind.

Now the alligator's head showed. From the course the brute was taking, it was heading for the nearest island. Presently its head and front legs appeared on the shore, the dim light glistening on the wet scales.

"Only a medium-sized fellow," whispered

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Tremaine, sighting. "But a good deal better than *no* 'gator."

Oliver Dixon caught enough of the spirit of the thing to crouch behind his host.

Bang! rang out Tremaine's rifle. It was a hit, but the shot struck under the shoulder, not disabling the alligator. With an angry flopping of its tail the beast turned to take to deeper water.

Bang! came from Dixon's rifle. This bullet struck against the 'gator's jaw. Bang! sounded Tremaine's second shot. This landed through the softer skin under the animal's nearer eye.

"Close in," commanded the host, eagerly. "We'll get that chap all right, now."

In its death agonies, yet possessing prodigious strength still, the 'gator flopped off into deeper water, diving.

"He'll soon come to the surface," predicted Jeff Randolph, coolly. "Better get in closer, Cap'n."

The launch was still going ahead, slowly, when the alligator came up, its head almost under the gunwale. The reptile's broad mouth opened, then the teeth snapped together, viciously.

Henry Tremaine leaned over the gunwale, and fired a shot that went in through an eye, penetrating the reptile's brain.

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"Back off a bit, Cap'n," advised Jeff. "We-all will soon have him."

Hardly a minute passed before the alligator, its last struggle finished under water, rose and lay on its back motionless.

"A higher type of animal, with a more vital brain, would have been killed quicker," observed Henry Tremaine, running a cleaning rod down his rifle barrel.

The four men following in the rowboat now lashed one end of a line around the dead 'gator, the other end being secured at the stern of the launch.

"How many of these things can we tow?" asked Mrs. Tremaine.

"I don't know, my dear, until I see how many we can get," smiled her husband. "I'd attempt to tow a long string of 'gators before I'd consent to leave any of our game behind."

"Fortunately we've food enough aboard so that we don't need to mind, much, if we have to spend most of the night towing dead alligators home," replied Mrs. Tremaine.

"Now, Cap'n," advised Jeff Randolph, "yo' may as well put on as much speed as yo' can handle. It'll be some time befo' we're likely to find any more 'gators above water within sound of the shots that have just been fired."

For twenty minutes more the launch cruised

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along with no sign of the game of the Everglades. In places the water courses proved barely wide enough to permit the passage of the boat. Presently they caught sight of a stretch of open water at least a third of a mile in diameter.

"Oh, *say!* Look ovah there!" whispered Jeff, excitedly, pointing to land at the eastward.

"Over there," well up on a slope, lay an alligator as huge as the one that Halstead had shot on a former occasion. The great reptile seemed asleep. It had evidently climbed high up from the water in order to catch the warmth of whatever sunlight might filter through the tall, moss-encumbered trees.

In great excitement Tremaine turned, holding up his hand as a sign to the occupants of the rowboat to halt. Then he bent over the young skipper, whispering hoarsely:

"Not too fast or too near. Slow, and no noise."

Halstead, turning his hand, repeated the order to Joe Dawson by signal. The launch almost immediately fell off to a speed that was barely more than drifting.

"We mustn't miss that fine fellow," exclaimed Tremaine, throbbing with all the ardor of the sportsman. "Halstead, I think that fellow must be bigger than the one you bagged. He's an old-timer!"

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The ladies entered into the general excitement. They rose, remaining standing, though Ida Silsbee, who did not enjoy the report of a gun close to her ear, slowly tiptoed toward the stern.

"My shot first!" spoke up Tremaine, eagerly. Then he added:

"Unless you want the chance, Dixon?"

"No, thank you," smiled the young man, carelessly. "I'll shoot if you miss, but I hope you won't."

"But, really, if you want——" urged Tremaine, considerately.

"I assure you again that I don't want it," replied the younger man, still smiling. "To me a good day's sport is in seeing a big bag. I don't care who does the shooting."

"Halstead——"

"I'm going to do my shooting with the steering wheel," laughed Tom, quietly. "After my fine luck the other day I'm not going to risk my reputation again."

So Tremaine had his heart's real wish—the first shot at the dozing alligator.

Closer in crept the boat, while the unsuspecting reptile slumbered on. Thrice Henry Tremaine sighted, then lowered his rifle, preferring to wait for a nearer shot.

The two Florida men looked on with polite

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enough interest, though they did not offer to reach for their rifles. Alligator-killing was an old story to them.

"Now, I reckon you're close enough, sir," whispered Jeff Randolph. "Sometimes these ole 'gators wake and get into the water powahful quick."

Again Tremaine sighted. He was too old a hunter to risk spoiling all by too long a sighting. He aimed for a spot just back of the fore shoulder.

Bang! Hardly had the flash left the muzzle when the huge 'gator thrashed, a red spot showing back of the fore shoulder. Then the slumbering animal turned with incredible rapidity, making for the water.

Bang! bang! Tremaine fired twice, as rapidly as he could, each shot going home. The wounded 'gator now floundered weakly close to the water's edge.

"One more shot and I've got him!" breathed Tremaine, tensely. That fourth shot woke the echoes, and the alligator crouched low, too spent to take to the water.

"Give him a minute or two. Then we'll go and get him," declared Tremaine, turning to sign to the men in the rowboat that they could approach now.

"There goes Mr. 'Gator," reported Jeff, as a

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final shudder ran through the bulky frame of the big reptile.

"Steam ahead, boys! Put in and get him," directed Tremaine.

No one was looking at Ida Silsbee, just at that moment. She, for some reason, had risen on her tip-toes on the little decked over space aft.

As Joe turned on the speed with a throb, the girl tottered. There was nothing at which to catch. Uttering a frightened shriek, Ida Silsbee fell over backward into the water.

Joe Dawson heard that cry. Like a flash he shut off the speed. Then, his face white, he sprang and dived where the waters had closed over the girl.

There was another shriek, this time from Mrs. Tremaine, as she caught sight of an alligator snout rising above the water not fifty yards away.

Tom Halstead saw that snout on the water. In another twinkling he was over the side.

Oliver Dixon sprang to plunge in, also, but Mr. Tremaine caught him by the arm, crying huskily:

"No, no, Dixon! Two over are enough. And there's a second 'gator, a third!"

Three of the brutes were close at hand, all nosing along towards these people at their mercy in the water.

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Up shot Joe's head above the black waters. He gripped Ida Silsbee, too, for Joe's dive had carried him straight to her side.

"Look out for the 'gators!" shrieked Mrs. Tremaine, ghastly with terror.

The two Florida men had snatched up their rifles, prepared to fire. Mr. Tremaine already had his.

Tom Halstead came to the surface to find himself between Joe and the nearest of the water enemies.

"Get her to the boat, Joe. I'll do the best I can to take up a 'gator's attention," shouted Tom desperately. He had no plan of attack. He was prepared to sacrifice himself to injury or mangling, if that would do any good.

"Good heaven, suh! We kain't shoot without running the risk o' hitting them that's in the water," cried one of the Florida men, desperately.

For now the swimmers were at the center of a circle bounded by the three alligators, while both boats were outside the dangerous area. To fire at any of the alligators, and miss, would be to take a chance of hitting one of the three human beings in the water.

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CHAPTER XVIII

A FEARFUL TWO MINUTES

RUSHING aft, Jeff dropped into a seat beside the motor. In another instant he had swung the speed on with his left hand, while his right grasped one of the rudder ropes.

Chug-chug! With the speed beginning, Jeff turned the launch in the shortest possible circle, then headed toward the people in the water.

"Yell!" he shouted. "Voices often scare 'gators!"

The Florida men in the rowboat won with the first yell by a margin of a second or so. Then everyone joined in.

The two who bent at the oars of the rowboat were putting in all their strength at a rapid, strong pull. One of the others crouched in the bow of the little craft, waiting until he should dare to fire.

Two of the alligators had slowed up, as if waiting to see what menace to them was conveyed by the chorus of wild yells. Then one of them sank below the surface.

The 'gator nearest Tom Halstead kept straight on, coming slowly, jaws moving and eyes blink-

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ing, as though the great reptile were figuring out the chances of successful attack.

"You just look out for Miss Silsbee, Joe," warned Tom. "I'll keep off this big fellow if I have to shove an arm down his throat!"

Ida Silsbee was wholly conscious. A brave girl, she had the good sense to realize how much depended upon her keeping cool and quiet, allowing her rescuers free hand to do what they thought best.

Tom Halstead had brought out his sailor's clasp knife, opening the blade. He now held this weapon in his right hand, ready to strike, no matter how uselessly, as a means of attracting the attention of the nearest alligator.

In the launch Henry Tremaine watched, with a horrible fascination, for the alligator that had dropped below the surface. If hunters' tales were true that vanished alligator was likely to try to drag down one of the helpless three from underneath.

Tom would not swim away from a straight line between Ida and the oncoming alligator. He watched, unflinchingly, the approach of the dangerous foe, wondering whether he could strike hard enough with his knife to make the 'gator retreat.

All this had occupied only seconds.

Now, Jeff Randolph had a chance to show

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what he meant to do. He drove the launch straight for the big alligator. The changed position of the boat gave Tremaine a possible chance to shoot without hitting any of those in the water.

"Don't fire!" warned Jeff, quickly. "Wait, suh."

Knowing that the Florida boy undertsood the points of the game vastly better, Tremaine removed his finger from the trigger.

As the launch sped up, the alligator from which most was to be feared veered slightly.

Jeff Randolph, however, was watchful and ready. He slightly veered the launch from its first course, then, as he had intended, drove the bow of the craft straight against the 'gator's broadside.

The force of the impact almost capsized the launch. His hand on the reversing gear, Jeff shot the launch back a few yards, swinging around.

This changed position gave Tremaine a chance to fire—not at the alligator the launch had just struck, but at the other visible one. His rifle spoke out instantly, just before a shot came from the rowboat.

By this time the alligators had all they could do to attend to their own safety. The creature that Jeff had struck with the bow of the launch

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had rolled partly over, recovered its balance, and then lashed its way to greater safety. At this one, too, Tremaine now fired, hitting, while Oliver Dixon followed it up with another bullet that registered.

Half standing, and seeing how the day was going, Jeff Randolph now steered toward Joe and Ida. In a twinkling Dixon reached out for the girl. Tremaine helped him to haul her into the boat. Joe Dawson pulled himself in, with slight help from Tremaine. Joe's first move was to lean over the opposite gunwale, and aid Captain Tom Halstead into the boat.

"Yo' can get one of the 'gators, suh," reported Jeff, pointing. "He's hurt, but floating."

Henry Tremaine again raised his rifle, sighted and fired. A second shot from him finished the 'gator.

"Two! That's good enough sport for one day," declared the host. "Ida, child, we've got to get you into something drier if possible, or you'll have pneumonia. Didn't you ladies bring some sort of extra clothing?"

"Yes; we've some makeshifts in the way of clothes that will make the child drier and warmer," replied Mrs. Tremaine.

"Then we'll run in to shore, disappear under the trees, and let you get Ida into those clothes,"

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replied the host, noting that his ward was already beginning to shake.

The launch was run to the nearest land, the rowboat following. As soon as both craft had been made fast the men-folks stepped out. Tom lifted a service-worn telescope bag from under a forward seat, remarking:

"Joe and I carry a few extra things with us, too."

The Florida men led the way over the bogs, watchfully alert for rattlers or other dangerous snakes. Jeff encountered one young rattler, and killed it with a few well-directed blows of a stick. Out of sight of the boat, Tom and Joe quickly shed their dripping garments, rubbing down and putting on dry clothing.

After waiting a sufficient length of time, Henry Tremaine shouted to his wife, receiving answer that the men might return.

They found Ida Silsbee reclining comfortably at the stern of the boat, wrapped in an overcoat and tucked in with steamer rugs.

"I'm as warm as toast," she declared. Then, gratefully:

"I hope you boys are as well off."

"Oh, we are," Joe nodded. "We're used to going overboard, or standing in pouring rains. We never go far without a clothes kit."

The Florida men now devoted their attention

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to securing the second alligator and adding it to the tow behind the launch.

"Mo' hunting, Mr. Tremaine?" inquired Jeff, coolly.

"Not to-day," responded the host, with emphasis. "We've had very fair sport, not to speak of a miraculous escape for my ward. We've had quite enough excitement. I think the old bungalow at the head of Lake Okeechobee will look very cheery to us when we get there."

Ida had already made some attempt to thank the young motor boat boys for their gallant conduct. Now, she tried to say much more. Mr. and Mrs. Tremaine and Oliver Dixon now started to overwhelm the boys with their gratitude, but Joe Dawson interposed quietly:

"The least said is soonest mended, you've heard, and I guess the same idea applies to thanks. We're glad we could be useful, but there is no use in making a fuss about us."

"That's about right," smiled Halstead. He turned to take his seat by the steering wheel, then observed the wistful looks of Jeff Randolph.

"I didn't know, before, Jeff," remarked the young captain, pleasantly, "that you knew anything about handling motor boats."

"I won't claim I *do* know a heap," rejoined

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Jeff, modestly, "but I will say that there's nothing I enjoy mo' than taking the wheel of a launch or cabin cruiser."

"Help yourself, then," invited Halstead, moving back. "You surely do know more about these black waters than I'll ever know."

Jeff's eyes gleamed with real pleasure as he seated himself at the wheel. He gave the engineer's signals, and backed the launch out neatly, then headed northward.

"Say, you've been on boats a good deal," remarked Skipper Tom, after watching him.

"Some," admitted the Florida boy, quietly. "I reckon I'd rather be on a boat than anywhere else in the whole world."

Jeff remained at the wheel until he had piloted them out of the Everglades and back into Lake Okeechobee. The two dead 'gators were rigged to the stern of the rowboat, in tow, and the small boat's bow line made fast astern on the launch. In this order the start was made for the forty-mile trip up the lake.

"I'm going to spell you at the wheel a bit, now, Jeff," said Tom Halstead. "But you can have the wheel again, whenever you want it."

"That'll be most all o' the forty miles ahead of us, then, I reckon," declared young Randolph.

It was slow work, indeed, getting back, not

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much more than seven miles per hour being possible. Supper, picnic-style, was served not long after dark. It was nearing the hour of ten when the boat at last rounded slowly in at the pier.

"Let me take her in," begged Jeff Randolph, who was again at the wheel.

"Go ahead," nodded Tom Halstead, good-humoredly. "I know you can do it."

"Jeff," laughed Henry Tremaine, "you ought to apply for membership in the famous Motor Boat Club of the Kennebec."

"Wouldn't I like to belong, though?" sighed the Florida boy.

"Would you?" queried Captain Tom.

"Don't poke fun at me," protested young Randolph.

"I'm not poking fun," rejoined Halstead, soberly. "Did you ever have any experience out on deep water?"

"I've been on sailing craft a good deal, and out fo' two trips on a motor cruiser," answered the Florida boy, in a low voice.

"How'd you like to come out on the 'Restless' for a while?"

"Do yo' mean it?" asked Jeff, anxiously.

"I certainly do. Still, at the same time, I must warn you that your duties on the 'Restless' would be mixed. You'd have to cook, be

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steward and take an occasional trick at the motors or the wheel."

"I don't care what it is," retorted Jeff, stubbornly, "so long as it's something on deep salt water, and on a motor boat at that."

"Make a good landing then," proposed Tom Halstead, smiling, yet serious, "and we'll talk it all over on shore."

Jeff Randolph laid the boat in at the pier without a scratch or a jar, with just enough headway and none to spare. Tom leaped ashore at the bow, Joe at the stern, and the little craft was made fast at her berth.

Ham Mockus was glad enough to see them back. He was hanging about at the land end of the pier. Though the black man's faith in ghosts had received a severe knock, still, to be all alone about the place after dark—well, it was a bit fearsome, anyway!

"Have any ghosts called, Ham?" laughingly demanded Henry Tremaine, as he caught sight of his black servitor.

"No, sah; no, sah," admitted the darkey, grinning sheepishly.

"Then the officers must have succeeded in keeping all the members of the ghost safely locked up in jail."

"Ah reckon so, sah—unless——"

"Well, unless what?"

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"W'y, sah, it jest might be, ob co'se, dat some restless fo'ks done take dem Eberglades trash out an' hitch 'em to a tree, wid deir feet offen de groun'."

"Oh, I guess it could not be as bad as that," smiled Mr. Tremaine.

"What have you been doing all these hours, Ham?" inquired Mrs. Tremaine.

"W'y, Ah done 'low, ob co'se, dat maybe yo' don' feel much satisfied wid dat cold food yo' done had erlong in de bo't, so Ah's done got some hot food up at de house—ef yo' want it."

"Ham," cried his employer, enthusiastically, "you're kind-hearted and proper. Lead us to that hot banquet."

It was over the table, an hour later, that Mrs. Tremaine asked her husband:

"How many more days do you intend to remain here hunting?"

"Have you ladies had all you want of it?" queried the host, looking at his wife and his ward.

"More than enough for my part," answered Mrs. Tremaine. Ida Silsbee added that she, personally, did not care to go alligator hunting again.

"You'll both of you be more contented," decided Mr. Tremaine, "if we run down to Oyster Bay and hoist anchor for Tampa. Up at Tampa

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you girls will have a chance to wear your pretty dresses. Jeff, can you start, before ten in the morning, and get the wagons back here to convey us to the coast?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then we'll leave here to-morrow afternoon," announced Mr. Tremaine. "We have alligator skins enough, anyway, to answer all purposes, including the making of an alligator leather bag for Halstead's mother. I'll have the bag made, Tom—a good, generous and handsome looking one."

"Captain Halstead," called out Jeff, following the young skipper away from table and speaking almost ceremoniously.

"You want to talk to me about going on the 'Restless'?" asked the young sailing master.

"Yes. Yo' wa'n't fooling, were yo'?"

"Of course not," rejoined Tom, heartily.

"And—and—would there evah be any chance fo' me to get into the Motor Boat Club?"

"We'd be only too glad to have you for a Florida member," replied young Halstead, "just as soon as you've shown that you can handle a boat of our kind."

Then Halstead and Joe discussed with Jeff his pay in his new position, and the exact nature of his duties.

"I reckon it all seems too good to be true,"

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sighed Jeff Randolph, but he knew, just the same, that it was no dream, and he was happy.

"Now, I've got to keep mighty cool and lull any suspicions Dixon may have," muttered Halstead to himself. "Of course he knows I received that letter from Clayton Randolph. Perhaps, until we get back to Oyster Bay, I can make Dixon feel that I don't believe any such thing possible of him. Once we get there, and Clayton Randolph backs up what he wrote me, I'll take the whole thing to Mr. Tremaine. Then, Dixon, if you *are* as big a scoundrel as I think you, your time will have come to pay back and take your medicine!"

CHAPTER XIX

A TRUCE, UNTIL——

"SO yo' are Cap'n Tom Halstead. Yes, I reckon yo' be," assented the tall, lanky individual whom Tom and Joe found on the deck of the "Restless."

These two motor boat boys had put off from shore some time in advance of the rest of the Tremaine party.

It had taken them the better part of two days, by carriage, to make the journey down to Tres Arbores, and Tom and Joe had put off at once,

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leaving Jeff to come out with the Tremaines, Miss Silsbee and Oliver Dixon.

Tom's astonishment at meeting this stranger, instead of Officer Randolph, showed in his face.

"I'm Bill Dunlow," volunteered the lanky stranger, thrusting a hand into one of his pockets. "Yo' see, it was like this: Clayton Randolph had to go up into the interior after a prisoner——"

"Oh!"

"So he done put me abo'd this boat. Told me jest what yo' wanted in the way of a watchman, and he lef' this note fo' yo'."

Tom looked over the note, in which Clayton Randolph informed the young captain of his protracted call to police duty, adding that Bill Dunlow was a "right proper man" to take his place.

"It's all right," nodded Tom. "I hope, Mr. Dunlow, you haven't been too lonely out here on this boat."

Halstead settled with the stranger, who then went ashore in the boat that was returning for the others of the party.

"What are you scowling at?" demanded Joe Dawson, looking keenly at his chum after the boat had left the side.

"Was I?" asked Tom, brightening. There had been reason enough for his scowl.

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"Randolph isn't here, so I can't take Mr. Tremaine to him. Confound the luck. Off we go to Tampa, and the mystery of the vanished money isn't cleared up. I wouldn't attempt to tell Mr. Tremaine without being backed by Officer Randolph or a letter from him. As for going up to that other town, and getting confirmation from Randolph's elder son, that would be out of the question. The young man wouldn't say a word about the express company's business, unless he had orders from his father. And Randolph is away, heaven alone knowing when he'll be back here. Oh, I hope Randolph also left a note for Mr. Tremaine. But no such luck!"

No wonder Tom Halstead was agitated as he paced the deck from bow to stern. As long as the mystery of the vanished money remained not cleared up he would never feel easy about the stain that it left clinging to Joe and himself—principally to himself.

The boat was coming out again from shore.

"Everybody in it except Dixon," discovered Halstead, with a start. "I wonder if that fellow has made an excuse to get away? Has he fled? Yet that doesn't seem just likely, either, after all the attention he showed Ida Silsbee on the way down from Lake Okeechobee. I guess he figures that, if he can once marry Tremaine's

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ward, then, no matter what leaks out, Tremaine will keep silent for Ida Silsbee's sake."

The boat was soon alongside.

"One passenger shy," hailed Halstead, forcing himself to laugh lightly.

"Yes," nodded Henry Tremaine, indifferently. "Dixon happened to think, at the last moment, to go up to the post office, to see if there was any mail for any of our party. Very thoughtful of the young man. We'll send the boat ashore for him, and he'll be out here on the next trip."

Tom Halstead watched the shore closely enough, after that. However, at last, he had the satisfaction of seeing Oliver Dixon wave his hand from the landing stage, and then embark in the rowboat.

"Any mail, Oliver?" asked Mr. Tremaine, as the young man stepped up over the side.

"Two for you, sir, and one for Mrs. Tremaine," replied young Dixon, handing over the letters. "None for Miss Silsbee, nor any for the crew."

"None for me, eh?" asked Captain Tom, his tone pleasant enough, to mask his thoughts. "I hope you had some mail for yourself, Mr. Dixon?"

"A bill and two circulars," nodded the young man, carelessly enough, though he shot a keen

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look back to meet Skipper Tom's inquiring gaze.

"Is there anything to prevent our sailing at once, now, Captain?" asked the charter-man. "I know the ladies are keen to be on their way to the delights of Tampa."

"I shall have to hold up a little while," replied Skipper Tom, pointing to the bridge deck chronometer. "I have discovered that it has been running slow while we were away. In navigation it is a matter of importance to have the chronometer just right to the second. But it ought not to take me long. If there's a watchmaker in Tres Arbores, he can adjust the chronometer within half an hour. Then I'll come right back, ready to sail."

Henry Tremaine nodded. Oliver Dixon had gone below, of which fact the young skipper was glad. It gave him a chance to get ashore before Dixon could offer, on some pretext, to accompany him.

The chronometer that the young skipper took over the side with him actually registered twenty-two minutes behind standard time. Sly Tom! He himself had set the hands back while awaiting the coming of the Tremaine party.

Once on shore the young captain hurried to the post office, where he indited an urgent letter to Clayton Randolph. Tom informed the local

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officer that he had received the latter's letter, but that it had disappeared before it could be put to use. Halstead urged Officer Randolph, on his return, to send to the captain of the "Restless," at the Tampa Bay Hotel, another letter by registered mail.

"If you can enclose any other evidence it will be of the greatest value," Tom wrote, also, by way of stronger hint.

Into the letter Halstead slipped a ten-dollar bill. After sealing the envelope, he handed it to the postmaster, saying:

"Register this, please. And don't give it to any other than Clayton Randolph—not even to anyone authorized to receive his mail."

That business attended to, Tom Halstead paid three bills against the boat, then hurried back to the water front, after having set his precious chronometer back to exactly the right time. Again he took boat out to the yacht, and bounding up on deck, his face was wreathed in smiles.

"Old Chronom. is all right, now," he called to Henry Tremaine, who was seated in one of the deck chairs, smoking. "Now, we'll start, sir, just as soon as we can get the anchor up."

Jeff, who had found time to run home to his mother and inform her of his great luck, lent a strong hand in the preliminaries to starting.

"Do yo' reckon, Cap'n, yo'd let me pilot the

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'Restless' out o' this harbor and some o' the way down the bay?"

"Go ahead," smiled Captain Tom, who was feeling unusually contented, at last. "Enjoy yourself all you like, Jeff, until it's time to go below and turn to preparing the evening meal."

So Jeff Randolph stood proudly by the wheel as the "Restless" pointed her nose down Oyster Bay, over a smooth sea, on her way to that great Florida winter resort, Tampa.

After their rest the twin motors ran, as Joe phrased it, "as though made of grease." Everybody aboard appeared to be unusually light-hearted.

"It's a pleasure to cruise like this," murmured Henry Tremaine, lighting a fresh cigar.

Jeff, happy over his new vocation, put all his lightest spirits into the preparation of the evening meal. As a guide he had had much experience with cookery. The meal went off delightfully.

Dixon, stepping up the after companionway after dinner, a cigarette between his lips, encountered the young sailing master.

"Good evening," Tom greeted, pleasantly.

"Oh, good evening," returned Mr. Dixon, smiling and showing his teeth.

"Did you ever see a pleasanter night than this on the water?" asked Halstead.

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"Not many, anyway. I hope the ladies will soon come up to enjoy it."

"I hope so," nodded Tom. "Somehow, this sort of a night suggests the need of singing and stringed instruments on deck, doesn't it?"

He spoke with an affectation of good will that deceived even Oliver Dixon, who, after glancing keenly at the young captain, suddenly said:

"Halstead, you didn't seem to like me very well, for a while."

"If I didn't," spoke the young skipper, seriously, "it may have been due to a rather big misunderstanding."

"Of what kind?" demanded Dixon.

"Well, connected with that miserable affair of the missing money."

"O—oh," said Dixon, looking still more keenly at the motor boat skipper.

"I knew," pursued Tom Halstead, "that I didn't take the money. For that reason, I suppose, I wondered if *you* were the one who had taken it? Lately, I have had reason to see how absurd such a suspicion would be."

"What reason?" demanded Oliver Dixon, his eyes almost blazing into Tom Halstead's face.

"Why, from Mr. Tremaine I've gleaned the idea that you're so comfortably well off in this world's goods that taking his few thousands of dollars would be an utter absurdity for you. So

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the vanishing of that money is back to its old footing of an unexplainable mystery."

"Did you say anything to Henry Tremaine about your suspicion?" inquired Dixon, looking searchingly at the boy.

"No," retorted Tom Halstead, curtly. "I had only my suspicion of the moment—no proof. I always try to play fair—and I'm glad I did."

The companionway door was being opened below. The ladies were ready to come up on deck.

Oliver Dixon held out his hand, as though by strong impulse.

"Halstead, you're a brick!" he exclaimed. "You're the right sort of young fellow. I don't mind your first suspicion, since you realize how groundless it was. We shall be better friends, after this. Your hand!"

Tom took the proffered hand—not too limply, either.

"I hope I've lulled the fellow's suspicion until I can strike," thought the young sailing master.

While Oliver Dixon said hurriedly to himself:

"This fellow was dangerous, but now I begin to think he's a fool. If I can keep him lulled for a few days more I may have all my lines laid. Then I can laugh at him—or pay someone to beat him properly!"

Diplomatic Tom! Crafty Dixon!

The ladies had come on deck.

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CHAPTER XX

AN INNOCENT EAVESDROPPER

DOWN at Port Tampa, out in the bay, lay the "Restless" at anchor.

Jeff Randolph was aboard the yacht, in sole charge. That Florida boy couldn't have been coaxed on shore, no matter what the allurement offered. He was supremely happy in the realization of his great ambition.

For four days, now, the Tremaines and their friends, including Captain Halstead and Engineer Dawson, had been at the big, luxurious Tampa Bay Hotel, at Tampa proper, nine miles up from the port.

Both Tom and his chum had demurred mildly when invited to go with the rest of the party to the hotel.

"Oh, come along," said Henry Tremaine, genially. "It will do you youngsters good to get away from your yacht once in a while. Up at the hotel you will mix with people, and learn some things of the ways of the world that can't be learned on the salt water."

Borne right down in their mild resistance, the boys had yielded and gone with the party.

Nor did either Halstead or Dawson feel at

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all out of his element in the sparkling life of the great hotel. Both were self-possessed boys, who had seen much of the world. Both were quiet, of good manners, and their shore clothing, once their uniforms were discarded on board the "Restless," were of good cut and finish.

Altogether, they *did* enjoy themselves hugely at this fashionable winter resort. Moreover, they made quite a number of pleasant acquaintances in Tampa, and found much to make the time pass pleasantly.

As for the Tremaines and their ward, they had met friends from the North, and were enjoying themselves. There were drives, automobile rides, short excursions, and the like. At night there was the hotel ball to take up the time of the ladies.

"It's rather a new world to us, chum, and a mighty pleasant one it is too," said Joe Dawson, quietly.

As for Halstead, though he remained outwardly cool and collected, these were days when he secretly lived on tenterhooks. He haunted the mail clerk's desk all he could without betraying himself to Dixon.

When asking Randolph to write him at this hotel the young skipper had planned to run up each day from Port Tampa. Now, however, being at the hotel all the time, young Halstead

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chafed as the time slipped by without the arrival of the letter he expected.

This afternoon, realizing that there was no possibility of a letter before the morrow, Halstead slipped off alone, following the street car track up into the main thoroughfare of Tampa.

Presently, in the throng, Halstead found himself unconsciously trailing after Tremaine and young Mr. Dixon.

"By the way, you're known at the bank here, aren't you, Tremaine?" inquired Dixon.

"Very well, indeed," smiled the older man. "In fact, I've entertained the president, Mr. Haight, in New York."

"Then I wish you'd come in with me, a moment, and introduce me," suggested the younger man.

"With pleasure, my boy."

As they stepped inside the bank Halstead passed on without having discovered himself to either of the others.

Henry Tremaine, inside the bank, led the way to Mr. Haight's office.

"Mr. Haight," he said to the man who sat at the sole desk in the room, "my friend, Mr. Dixon, has asked me to present him to you. He's a good fellow, and one of my yachting party."

Mr. Haight rose to shake hands with both callers.

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"I wish to cash a check for a thousand," explained Dixon, presently.

"You have it with you?" inquired President Haight.

"Yes; here it is."

"Ah, yes; your personal check," said Mr. Haight, scanning the slip of paper. "Er—ah—er—as a purely formal question, Mr. Tremaine, you will advise me that this check is all right?"

Oliver Dixon laughed carelessly, while Henry Tremaine, in his good-hearted way, responded:

"Right? Oh, yes, of course. Wait. I'll endorse the check for you."

Nodding, Mr. Haight passed him a pen, with which Tremaine wrote his signature on the back of the check. With this endorsement it mattered nothing to the president whether the check was good or not. Henry Tremaine's written signature on the paper bound the latter. Mr. Haight knew quite well that Tremaine's name was "good" for vastly more than a thousand dollars.

"I'll endorse anything that my young friend Dixon offers you," smiled the older man, as he passed the check back to the bank president.

"With such a guarantee as that," smiled Mr. Haight, affably, "Mr. Dixon may negotiate all the paper he cares to at this bank."

"I may take you up, later on," smiled the younger man. "I've taken such a notion to

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Tampa that I think I shall buy a place here, and spend a goodly part of my winters here."

"In that case, if you'll favor us with your account——" began Mr. Haight.

"That is exactly what I shall want to do," the young man assured the bank president.

The money was brought, in hundred dollar bills, and Dixon tucked it away in his wallet. After handshakings all around, the two callers departed.

On coming out of the bank Oliver Dixon trod as though on air. He was beginning to feel the importance of a man who is "solid" at a bank.

Having turned back along the main thoroughfare, Halstead met the pair as they came out of the bank.

"You look rather aimless, Captain," observed Tremaine, halting and smiling.

"I'm just strolling about taking in the sights of this quaint little old place," replied Tom.

"And I've been making Dixon acquainted at the bank, so that he can cash his checks hereafter without difficulty," replied Mr. Tremaine. "As I am in a position to know that the young man has a good deal of money about him, I think we ought to require him to lead us to the nearest ice cream place. Eh?"

"He'll do it," laughed Tom, easily, "if he's as good natured as he is prosperous."

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Nodding gayly, young Mr. Dixon wheeled them about, piloting them without more ado in the right direction.

The night's dance was on at the Tampa Bay Hotel. The strains of a dance number had just died out. Out of the ball-room couples poured into the great lobby of the hotel, rich and fragrant with the plants of the tropics. Doors open on the east and west sides of the lobby allowed a welcome breeze to wander through. Women wore the latest creations from Paris; the black-coated men looked sombre enough beside their more gayly attired ball-room partners. All was life and gayety.

Tom Halstead, who did not boast evening clothes in his wardrobe, had dropped into a chair beside a window in one of the little rooms off the lobby. The breeze had blown the heavy drapery of the window behind his chair, screening him from the gaze of anyone who entered the room—a fact of which the young skipper was not at that moment aware.

Into this room, with quicker step than usual, came a young woman. Into her face had crept lines of pain. She looked like a woman to whom had come a most unwelcome revelation.

At her side, pale and over-anxious, stepped a young man. Yet his face was strongly set, as

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the face of a man who did not intend to accept defeat easily.

The young woman wheeled abruptly about, looking compassionately at her escort. Then she spoke; it was the voice of Ida Silsbee:

"I can't tell you how wretched this has made me feel, Mr. Dixon," she said, in a low voice. "So far, I have given no thought to marriage."

"Do—do you love anyone else?" he inquired, huskily.

"No," she answered, promptly. "I am heart-free—utterly so."

"Then why may I not hope?" he demanded, eagerly.

"No, no; it would be worse than unkind for me to let you even hope that I might change my answer. I do not care for you in the way that a woman should love her husband."

"Have you any real objection to me?"

"Yes," she answered, clearly, steadily, meeting his eyes. "My objection is not one that should cause you any humiliation, Mr. Dixon. It is simply that you do not combine the qualities that I would expect in the man I married."

"But you have not known me long. Perhaps——"

"I have seen enough of you, Mr. Dixon, to feel certain that I should never feel a deep affection for you."

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"If you have discovered anything about me," he pleaded, intensely, "I might be able—would be able—to change for your sake."

"That, of all, is least likely," she replied, honestly, seriously. "If you were the man to win my heart, Mr. Dixon, you would already have shown the traits, the characteristics, that would interest me in a man."

"And I have not shown those traits?"

"You have not."

"Then wait! Perhaps——"

Ida Silsbee laid an appealing hand on the arm of the pallid-faced young man.

"Do not hope. Do not give this unhappy fancy any further encouragement, Mr. Dixon. To say what I am saying now gives me the greatest pain I have felt in many a year. But, believe me, there is absolutely no hope that I can ever love you. My own heart tells me that most positively. You understand, don't you? It will be worse than folly ever to think of repeating our talk of these last few minutes. I am heartily sorry, but I do not love you, Mr. Dixon, and I am wholly certain that I never shall. Now, please lead me among others that we may be certain not to carry this wholly unpleasant, impossible conversation any further."

It was said in all gentleness. Yet, as he watched her while she was speaking, Oliver

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Dixon realized that this young woman knew her own mind thoroughly. He saw, and believed, that he could never be anything to her.

"A heart's Waterloo, then," he sighed, with a bitter smile. He bowed, offering her his arm. "I shall not distress you again, Miss Silsbee."

They turned, passing from the room, joining the throng in the lobby.

Tom Halstead? He had heard every word. Too honorable to play the eavesdropper, he had risen at once. Then he had halted for a brief instant, that he might think what best to do in the circumstances.

From the first word the conversation had told its own story swiftly. Captain Halstead, at the very moment of impulse to step from behind the draperies and proclaim his presence, drew back. By showing himself was he not far more likely to bring great annoyance upon Ida Silsbee?

The scene had passed swiftly. While Tom Halstead was rapidly trying to make up his mind whether he would annoy Miss Silsbee more by showing himself, the pair turned and left the room.

"That makes me feel like a mean hound!" Tom Halstead muttered, indignant with himself, though he was not at fault. "I had no notion of playing the spy, yet I've done it. Confound

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it, there's only one reparation I can make, and that is to hold my lips padlocked!"

He waited but a decent interval, then stepped from the room, afraid that, if he lingered in his former seat, he might be forced to be a witness to more such scenes. Though Halstead had no means of knowing it, that little room had been the scene of hundreds of proposals of marriage.

"Yet, now that I *do* know what I had no business to find out in that way," murmured Skipper Tom to himself, "I've got Mr. Tremaine's interests to think about a bit. If Oliver Dixon knows that he has been defeated, then he'll be likely to get away in a hurry, and without leaving any address behind, for he has at least the money he stole from Tremaine. That is, if he *did* steal it. Of course he did."

Hearing the music and the soft, rhythmic swish of feet over the waxed floor, young Halstead presently glanced in through one of the entrances to the ball-room. Dixon was there, dancing with Mrs. Tremaine. The young man had recovered much of his usual self-possession, even forcing a smile. Then Ida Silsbee, still looking pained, glided by, directed by the arm of Henry Tremaine.

"Does Dixon mean to fly?" Tom wondered. "After all, why should he? He's having a good time, and he doesn't fear being found out. Be-

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sides, he's very likely a big enough egotist to imagine there's still a chance of winning Miss Silsbee. No; I hardly think he'll run away for a while yet."

None the less the young motor boat captain determined to keep a close eye over the movements of Oliver Dixon.

CHAPTER XXI

DIXON STOCK DROPS

"JOE, you can keep yourself so easily out of sight, somehow, that I'm going to use you to play the spy to-day," hinted Captain Tom to his chum, after the two had had an early breakfast together.

"I'm not afraid of anything you use me for," Dawson retorted.

"You must have a better opinion of me than I have of myself sometimes," retorted the motor boat captain, thinking of his unintentional eavesdropping of the night before.

"What do you want me to do?" Joe Dawson asked.

"You know the morning train that leaves here, for Washington and New York?"

Joe nodded.

"Get aboard that train as soon as it comes in

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on the spur. If Oliver Dixon is aboard of it, and doesn't leave when the Tampa station is reached, then jump out and telephone me here."

"And then——?"

"Hustle aboard again, keeping Dixon in sight, but try to keep yourself out of his line of vision."

"Something must be in the wind," commented Joe.

"Something *is* in the wind," his chum admitted. "If Oliver Dixon tries to leave here to-day, then I shall go to Mr. Tremaine, and he'll very likely decide to have the authorities telegraph ahead to have Dixon arrested. If that should happen, you'll be there to see that the officers don't get someone else by mistake."

"But Dixon might go around through the town of Tampa, instead," objected Joe. "He might be too smart to take the northbound train here at the hotel."

"Yes; or he might go through the town and take the Florida Central train," assented Halstead. "If he doesn't leave here by the train, but goes up through Tampa, then you, on board the train, will see him if he gets aboard at the Tampa station. If he doesn't go by that train, you'll be here in season to shadow him away in case he tries to leave by the Florida Central. So he can't start north to-day without our knowing it. It's best for you to do this work.

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Then, if Dixon is watching me, he'll find me sitting on one of the porch chairs from which I couldn't see him take the train. That will do a lot to throw him off his guard."

"I know my part, then," agreed young Dawson. "I'll do it, too."

One of the railroads that enter Tampa goes on down to Port Tampa, nine miles below. This road also maintains a spur entering the hotel grounds. All through trains by this road arrive and depart on the spur.

Dixon, however, appeared about the lobby and the verandas that forenoon, looking as though anything but flight was in his mind. Much of his time he spent in the company of Henry Tremaine, and appeared unusually lively and contented.

"No get-away for him," decided Halstead, later. "He's going to stay and have some more tries at his luck with Miss Silsbee. Anyway, it's too late, now, for him to take the morning train north by either railway."

Joe went as far as Tampa, of course without result. He took the street car back to the hotel, reporting to Tom, by a mere signal, as he passed, the fruitlessness of his mission. Then Joe hung about, in the background, until after the time for the morning train to leave over the Central road. At that time Dixon was chatting

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with Mr. and Mrs. Tremaine and Ida Silsbee.

Further vigilance, for the present, therefore, seemed unnecessary. Leaving Dixon with the other members of the party, the two motor boat boys hurried over to the bathing pavilion for their morning salt water swim.

It was just after one o'clock when the chums returned through the hotel office.

"Captain Halstead!" called the clerk.

Tom hastened over to the desk.

"You're just in time, Captain. Here's a letter registered for you, and under special delivery stamp. The young man just came in with it."

"Let me have it quick, then, please," Tom begged, turning upon the messenger from the Tampa post office.

"Sign, first," requested the messenger.

This Tom did in a hurry, then seized upon his letter. It was postmarked at Tres Arbores, and the boy remembered the writing. The letter was from Clayton Randolph, and repeated, in a more emphatic manner, the news that the officer had already sent Halstead while he was at the lake.

"I'm sending this just as you ask," Randolph ran on, "though I don't suppose it's necessary, because at the same time I sent you the other letter, I dropped one for Mr. Tremaine in the

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Tres Arbores post office. Of course he got it on his return to this town."

"Of course he didn't!" blazed Tom inwardly. "Oliver Dixon got the mail there, and he was smart enough to keep Randolph's letter from ever reaching Mr. Tremaine."

"Something interesting that you have?" smiled Joe, watching his chum's face.

"Interesting?" palpitated Tom Halstead. "Well, rather! Now, where's Mr. Tremaine?" —as the boys turned away from the desk.

"Speaking of angels," returned Joe Dawson. "There he is coming in through the doorway yonder."

"I've got to see him on the jump, then. Come along."

"What's this?" demanded Henry Tremaine, as Tom almost breathlessly thrust into his hands the letter just received.

"Read it," begged Captain Halstead.

This the charter-man did, his face changing color as soon as he began to understand.

"Dixon?" he faltered. "Oh, impossible! Yet—confound it! The case does look black, doesn't it? I must see Dixon, anyway. If this is injustice, then he must have a chance to prove his innocence at once."

"Do you know where he is?" Halstead inquired.

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"No; the ladies have just passed through to luncheon, and they sent me to find the young man. Now, I'm more than ever anxious to find him."

Henry Tremaine looked worried, though he was not yet ready to believe Dixon certainly guilty. Tremaine's nature was a large one; he was unsuspicious, usually. He hated to believe anyone guilty of real wickedness.

"Ah, good morning, Mr. Tremaine," came, cordially, from Mr. Haight, the president of the bank, as that gentleman stepped inside from the porch.

"How do you do, Mr. Haight?" returned the perplexed Tremaine.

The bank president started to pass on, then turned.

"Oh, by the way, Mr. Tremaine, I was very glad to attend to your note this morning——"

"My note?" demanded Tremaine.

"That is to say, the one you endorsed."

"The note I endorsed?" gasped Henry Tremaine, paling. "Great Scott, man, who presented it?"

"Do you mean to tell me, sir, that you don't know of a note presented to-day with your endorsement?" demanded President Haight, in great agitation.

"Great Scott, man, I don't!" cried Henry

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Tremaine. "And I'm still trying to find out who presented it."

"Oliver Dixon," rejoined Mr. Haight, in a sepulchral voice.

"Dixon? For how much?"

"Fifty thousand dollars."

"Did he get the cash?"

"Good heavens, yes!" gasped Mr. Haight, now fully understanding that the whole transaction had been wrong.

"In real money?" insisted Tremaine, on whose forehead the cold ooze now began to stand out.

"Yes, sir; in banknotes. Don't tell me, Tremaine, that your endorsement was forged."

"But it was! I have endorsed no notes for anybody."

"Yet, if it wasn't your signature, it was as good as a photograph of your writing," gasped Mr. Haight.

"Oh, Dixon has seen enough of my signature. He had no difficulty in getting plenty of material in that line to copy. Oh—the miserable scoundrel!"

Tom and Joe had heard this conversation quite unnoticed by either of the distracted gentlemen.

"One thing," cried Tremaine, hoarsely; "I don't believe the fellow can get far away from

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here before we can overtake him. This early discovery is most fortunate!"

"He can't get a train away before four o'clock," broke in Tom Halstead, energetically. "But he might get some kind of a craft out of Port Tampa. Hadn't you better get on the 'phone, quickly, and inform the police? Also, you might inquire of the two station agents whether Dixon has bought a ticket away from Tampa."

"Yes! And you and Joe Dawson hustle over the hotel! We must get hold of this precious, unmasked rascal! Come along, Haight!"

"I guess Dixon stock has dropped," uttered Joe, grimly, as the two motor boat boys hurried away.

As they were passing the entrance to the dining room they encountered Mrs. Tremaine and Ida Silsbee coming out.

"We couldn't wait for the rest of you," confessed Mrs. Tremaine. "We've lunched. But —what on earth——?"

"Oliver Dixon," spoke Tom, in a cautious undertone, "has presented a note for fifty thousand dollars at the bank, with Mr. Tremaine's endorsement forged on the note. It is feared he has gotten away with the money."

Joe, not caring to lose any time, had darted on ahead.

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"Why—I—I—never believed him such a scoundrel," gasped Mrs. Tremaine, paling. She sank into a chair, trembling.

"The villain had the audacity, last night, to ask me to marry him," murmured Ida, in a low tone, clenching her hands tightly.

"I know it," confessed Tom, bluntly. "I was in that room, behind the draperies. I meant to reveal myself, but it was all out, and you two turned from the room before I could decide what to do. Oh, I felt miserably ashamed of myself for my eavesdropping."

"You couldn't help it, and you needn't be ashamed," retorted Ida Silsbee. "Tom, I'm heartily glad I had a witness to my good judgment."

"I've got his trail," called Joe, softly, running back to join them. "Dixon left twenty-five minutes ago, on a train going out from the spur at this hotel."

"Then he must have gone to Port Tampa," breathed Tom, tensely.

"Yes—to the port," Joe Dawson nodded.

"Then we've got to find Mr. Tremaine like lightning. There's a speed cruiser for charter down at the port. Dixon may even now be hustling away on her," cried Captain Halstead, springing away. "If he has done that he can land on some wild part of the coast of Mexico,

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or transfer to some ship bound for South America. The earth may swallow him up—him and his booty!"

Leaving the ladies where they had first met them, the boys raced to the telephone exchange. Here they encountered Tremaine and the bank president.

"There's just one thing to do, then," responded Henry Tremaine. "I'll arrange for a special engine on the jump. Haight, you get a couple of local officers here in a hurry. This is a felony charge, so they won't have to wait for warrants."

In a few moments the local railway and police officials were busy. A locomotive was quickly awaiting the party on the siding, where it was coupled to a day coach. Two policemen in plain clothes arrived in an automobile.

"Remember, I'm going with you," cried Mrs. Tremaine, with more energy than she had shown in years. "So is Ida. The poor child can't be left behind to wonder what luck we're having."

There wasn't even time to object to taking the ladies along. They hurried into the car, and the locomotive started, with a clear track ahead.

"One little detail I haven't found time to tell you, yet," panted Mr. Haight, after the engine

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had started down the single track to Port Tampa. "Dixon also cashed with me a check for nine thousand dollars."

"On the Ninth National, of New York?" Halstead asked.

"Yes."

"Then I guess the check part is good, as far as you're concerned," nodded Tremaine. "The nine thousand is probably part of the ten thousand that the fellow stole from my stateroom on the 'Restless' and sent to New York. Halstead has just put me straight on that matter."

"Then he stole that money from your trunk?" asked Mrs. Tremaine, opening her eyes very wide.

"Yes, my dear; we've every reason to think so. But tell me, Haight, how did you come to cash that note so promptly—so—er—easily?"

"Why, you told me, only yesterday, my dear Tremaine, that you'd cheerfully endorse any commercial paper that Dixon had or chose to present," replied the bank president.

Henry Tremaine groaned.

"That's what comes of my being so cursed good-natured and obliging," he muttered, with a ghastly smile. "Now, see here, Haight, if it comes to the worst, and your bank is up against a big loss, I'll stand by what I said yesterday.

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But I'm fairly itching to lay my fingers on Oliver Dixon. The——"

He stopped immediately, aware of the presence of the ladies.

"I beg your pardon, my dear, and Ida," said Tremaine. "I'm so angry that I almost let violent language escape me."

As the train sped along, with a clear track ahead and no stops necessary, Mr. Haight went on to explain:

"Dixon told me he had closed negotiations for a fine place a little way outside of Tampa; that he needed some of the cash for paying for the place, and the rest to turn over to a contractor so that improvements on the place could start at once. It all sounded fearfully plausible; and, with your ready and extensive guarantee for young Dixon——"

"Please don't remind me of my idiocy again until I've had time to pull up a notch," begged Tremaine.

The two Tampa officers had seated themselves together at the forward end of the car. They were lean, quiet men, of undying nerve, and crack shots in the moment of need.

It did not take long to haul the one-car special down to the port. As the train began to run out onto the long mole, all hands in the car crowded at the forward doorway.

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Before the engine came to a full stop Tom Halstead and Joe Dawson were off and running at a great burst of speed for the extreme end of the mole. Halstead was the first to gain it.

"The 'Buzzard' is gone from anchorage," he cried, as his gaze swept the harbor.

"That little bit of hull we can see away down past the harbor looks like the 'Buzzard' heading south," declared Joe.

"It must be," nodded Tom Halstead. "But Jeff will very likely know."

A busily-throbbing little naphtha launch was hovering close in the water.

"Hurry in for a fare, can you?" shouted Captain Halstead, framing his mouth with his hands.

The launch turned in at the float, and by this time the other members of the party had hastened up.

"Out to the 'Restless', and give your whistle head enough so that our man on board will hear you," cried Tom, as the launch cast off.

In response to the screeches of the whistle Jeff Randolph soon appeared on the deck of the motor cruiser, waving his arms in answer.

"Get everything ready for a lightning start!" yelled the young skipper over the water. This Joe supplemented with some strenuous signals.

"Do you know whether that's the 'Buzzard'

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vanishing to the southward?" demanded young Captain Halstead, the instant he clambered over the side.

"Yes; it is," nodded Jeff, promptly.

CHAPTER XXII

KICKING WATER IN THE WAKE OF THE "BUZZARD."

"DID you see what passengers she carried?" added Tom Halstead, breathless with suspense.

"A young man. I didn't note him particularly at the distance," Jeff Randolph drawled.

"Could it have been Oliver Dixon?"

"Why, yes, about his build, though the distance was considerable, and the fellow's back was turned this way as he went on board."

"Just one passenger went to the 'Buzzard', eh?" broke in Henry Tremaine.

"All I noticed," confessed Jeff. "I wasn't paying particular attention."

Joe, in the meantime, had made a straight break down into the motor room. Now his engines were running.

"Lay out forward, here, Jeff, to help me stow the anchor away," called the youthful skipper. One of the Tampa officers also aided.

"Crowd the speed on, Joe, as fast as you prop-

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erly can," shouted down Halstead as he took his place at the wheel.

Almost with a jump the "Restless" started. The boat supposed to be the "Buzzard" was now about hull-down. Her solitary signal mast would be a hard thing to keep in sight across an interval of several miles.

By this time Jeff Randolph was in possession of the main facts. He knew they were in frenzied pursuit of Oliver Dixon, who was believed to carry with him some sixty thousand dollars, in all, that Henry Tremaine stood to lose.

Now that President Haight knew his bank did not stand to lose a large sum, because of Tremaine's unfaltering guarantee, the bank man was no longer near a state of collapse. Still, he keenly felt Tremaine's suspense.

"I'll never be such a fool again," muttered Tremaine, to his wife. "I'll never go security for anyone after this—not even my brother."

"I can't understand why you were so easy over the loss of the first ten thousand dollars," murmured his wife.

"That was because I believed the whole matter would come out presently. I didn't want to suspect Halstead, and I didn't want to suspect young Oliver Dixon. So I didn't know where the lightning might hit. Rather than stir up trouble I preferred to wait and see what the

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developments would be. Ten thousand dollars I could stand the loss of, if I had to, but sixty thousand——"

The "Restless" was kicking the water at a furious gait, now, but Captain Halstead groaned when he realized that the "Buzzard" had succeeded in taking her hull wholly out of sight.

"Mr. Tremaine, I'll have to press you into service," called the young sailing master, firmly.

"Yes; *do* give me something to do," begged the charter-man, stepping up beside the wheel.

"The 'Buzzard' is now so far away, sir, that I'm not quite sure whether I can see her signal mast or not. Sometimes I think I do; at other times I'm in doubt. You might take the marine glass, sir, and see if you can pick up that mast and keep it in sight."

"Indeed, I will," breathed Tremaine, anxiously.

"Joe," Captain Tom called down through the forward hatchway, "kick on every bit of speed you can crowd out of the motors. We've *got* to hump faster."

"If I go much faster," called Joe, dryly, "I'll blow out a cylinder head."

"Take a chance," Halstead urged. "We've got to crawl up on that other craft."

"I can make out her signal mast," announced Henry Tremaine.

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"Then keep that stick in sight, sir. There's one nasty trick the 'Buzzard' might play on us if she got far enough in the lead," explained the young skipper.

"What trick is that?"

"If she's running close enough to shore, she might succeed in putting Dixon on land, then the 'Buzzard' could head out on her cruise again. If that happened, every throb of our propellers would be carrying us further and further from Oliver Dixon and his booty."

"Good heavens, yes!" agreed Tremaine. "Well, I'm holding that signal mast steadily."

"Does she seem to be nearing land?"

"Not yet. I judge her course to be southward."

"Let me have the glass a second," begged Halstead, jamming the wheel spokes with his knees as he reached out for the glass.

He took a long, intent look.

"Yes; she's holding her southerly course," Tom declared.

"Are we going to catch up with her?"

"I don't know, yet," Halstead admitted. "The 'Buzzard' is a fast boat. Whether we can catch up with her only the next two hours can tell. We've got a mighty good boat under our feet, Mr. Tremaine."

"We need one!" cried that gentleman.

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It being none of their affair, particularly, for the present, the two Tampa officers were lounging in deck chairs aft, smoking quietly. The ladies, however, stood just behind the men, as close to the bridge deck as they could keep without interfering with the handling of the craft.

"Let me have the glass again, please," begged Halstead, ten minutes later. "Yes, I thought so," he continued, after looking. "That line on the water near the horizon is the 'Buzzard's' hull showing once more. Then we must be creeping up on her."

"Want me to take the wheel, Cap'n, for a spell?" hinted Jeff Randolph.

"Not just now," vouchsafed Tom Halstead. "Just now straight steering counts for as much as the speed of the propellers. You may be a better helmsman than I, by a good deal, but I can't take a single chance for the next hour."

In the next half hour, during which the Tampa harbor was left far behind, the hull ahead loomed up no larger. It remained an all but indistinct line on the horizon.

"If Mr. Dixon is on that boat, do you think he knows we're after him?" Ida Silsbee asked.

"He must have more than a suspicion," Tom Halstead grinned.

"What an awful feeling his must be, then!" exclaimed the girl, shuddering.

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"Are you sorry for him?" asked Mrs. Tremaine, slowly.

"Only in the sense that I'm sorry for any man who yields to the temptation to turn thief," replied the girl, slowly.

As Joe Dawson thrust his head up through the hatchway his chum at the wheel could see that the young engineer was much disturbed.

"Are we crowding your motors too hard, Joe?" inquired Halstead.

"They're mighty warm," Dawson admitted.

"Any danger of exploding a lot of gasoline gas?" demanded Henry Tremaine.

"I won't just say that," replied Joe, hesitatingly. "But——"

"But what?"

"If I keep up this overheating one or both of the motors may be put out of business."

"Is that all?"

"It would ruin a pair of good engines."

"If that's all, boys," responded Tremaine, "don't let it worry you. If you hurt any engines, or damage your boat in any way, I'll make good for it. I want to catch Dixon, and get that stolen money back. But, above money and every other consideration—at no matter what expense—I feel that I must overtake and punish the man who so fearfully abused my confidence and trust!"

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CHAPTER XXIII

DIXON'S COWARDLY ACT

IN the next half hour the hull streak of the "Buzzard" became large enough for all aboard the "Restless" to see it with the naked eye.

"We're surely gaining," cried Tremaine, joyously.

"Not enough, sir," replied Tom, shaking his head.

"What do you mean, lad?"

"Why, sir, if we don't begin to gain faster, soon, then night will come down on us in a few hours, and we won't be able to make out enough to keep that other boat in sight. She could change her course and slip away."

"But her lights? It promises to be clear weather to-night."

Anxious as he was, Captain Tom Halstead did not entirely succeed in suppressing a grin.

"An outlaw boat—a pirate craft, such as the 'Buzzard' is when engaged in a trick of this kind, isn't likely to carry any visible lights at night."

"Then we——"

"We'll have to, sir. This is an honest boat, sailing under the law. Only United States naval

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or revenue people, on board, could legally authorize this craft to sail at night without lights, and then only under stress of great need."

"We have police officers on board."

"They don't count in an excuse for sailing at night without masthead and side lights showing," Captain Tom replied, gravely. "The whole story is told, sir, when I say that our only chance lies in getting so close to the 'Buzzard' before dark that, lights or no lights, she can't give us the slip in the dark."

"Then the chances are all against our success, aren't they?" inquired Mrs. Tremaine.

"Yes, madam," replied the young sailing master.

Henry Tremaine, who had put away the marine glass, began to tramp the deck at starboard, clenching and unclenching his fists.

"Halstead," he cried, desperately, at last, "what can we do—no matter what the cost—to get up closer to that pirate craft?"

"Nothing more than we're doing now, sir."

"Can't we burn more gasoline?"

"Not without heating the motors so that we'd be stopped altogether within a few minutes."

"How far are we away from the 'Buzzard'?"

"Probably five miles, at least."

"Then, even if we gained half a mile an hour for ten hours, we'd just barely get alongside?"

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"That's right, sir.'

"Whereas, in a good deal less than ten hours, it will be dark?"

"Right again, Mr. Tremaine.'

"Then," uttered Henry Tremaine, with a look of disgust, "we might as well put back and loaf along our way into the harbor at Tampa."

"But we won't do it," declared Tom Halstead, with spirit.

"No? Why not?"

"Because I'm in command here, Mr. Tremaine. We're after a scoundrel, and the officers are ready to do their duty. No matter how long the chase is, I simply *won't* give it up until I find that the 'Buzzard' is wholly out of sight and past our powers of overtaking."

"Jove! You've got the right grit!" replied the charter-man, admiringly. "But, as it's going to take hours, anyway, I'm going to drop some of my excitement and get more comfort out of life. Can you spare young Randolph?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Then, Jeff, get some luncheon for those who want it, myself included," ordered the charter-man.

Tom Halstead laughed enjoyingly.

"That's the most practical order you could give, Mr. Tremaine. We may have our whole hearts in this present business, but a good meal

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all around won't hinder the success of our work a bit."

The galley of the "Restless" being provided with food of kinds that could be speedily prepared, it was not long before Jeff had an appetizing meal laid in the cabin aft. Then Joe came up to the wheel while his chum partook of a quick meal in the motor room. That done, Tom took his place at the helm once more, while Joe Dawson and Jeff Randolph ate.

Joe's jaw was squarely set when he came on deck the next time, though this fact did not hide his look of concern.

"You'd sooner cripple the motors than give up the race before you have to?" the young engineer inquired, in a low voice.

"There's only one thing we'll slow up for," responded Halstead, looking at his companion. "That will be if you think there's danger of a gasoline explosion."

"No! there's no danger of that," sighed Joe. "But the motors won't hold out much longer at this speed. We're going at least three miles an hour faster than the engines were ever built to go."

"What's our speed?" asked Henry Tremaine.

"Just about thirty miles an hour, sir," Joe Dawson answered. "I've followed orders and

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am crowding every possible revolution without regard for anything but danger to life."

"You're not running the ladies' lives into danger, then?"

"No, sir."

"Good! That's all I care about," ordered the charter-man. "When this day is over I'll install newer and better engines for you, if these are hurt in any way, and I'll pay you for whatever time the boat may be laid up for repairs."

"Say, but we're gaining on them," reported Captain Tom, a few minutes later. "Do you notice how much larger the 'Buzzard's' hull looms?"

"It does," agreed Tremaine. "That's a certain fact."

Everybody, the Tampa officers included, crowded forward for a look.

Watchful of the slightest variation of the helm, Captain Halstead steered the straightest line that his sea experience had taught him to do.

"Great!" cried the charter-man. "If this keeps up, we'll overhaul those fellows before dark. But how do you account for our sudden success?"

"I've a strong notion," responded Dawson, "that those fellows on the 'Buzzard' have had

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to slow down their engines to prevent a crash in the machinery."

"If you can only keep yours going, then!"

"I'm trying hard enough," muttered Joe, holding up his oil can. "I am keeping this thing in my hand all the time, now."

Within another quarter of an hour it was plain that further gains had been made on the craft ahead.

Joe now felt warranted in easing up ever so little on his own motors, yet he was careful not to shut off too much speed.

"It's odd that our two vessels should be the only ones in sight," remarked Mrs. Tremaine, as the race continued down the Florida coast.

"There isn't a heap of commerce on this side of Florida," Halstead answered. "As like as not we'll not sight another craft all afternoon."

In another hour the distance between the two motor boats was less than two and a half miles. Joe eased up just a trifle more, then came on deck, his eyes glowing.

"The 'Buzzard's' engineer didn't take all the care of his motors that he ought to have done at the start," guessed Dawson. "Now he's sorry, I reckon."

"Have you a little time to spare, Joe?" queried Halstead, who did not quit the wheel.

"I guess so. What can I do?"

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"Get the code book and the signal bunting. Have Jeff help you rig up a signal, and hoist it to the head of the signal mast."

"What signal?" queried the young engineer.

"Signal: 'Lie to. We are after criminal on your vessel.'"

For some moments Joe ran through the pages of the code book. Then he selected the signal flags, while Jeff Randolph fastened them to a halyard in the proper order.

"All complete," announced Joe. "Hoist away."

Up went the line of bunting, breaking out gracefully. There was just enough breeze to spread the signals clearly.

"Let the cap'n of the 'Buzzard' pass that by if he thinks best," muttered one of the Tampa officers, dryly.

"He could declare, afterwards, that he didn't observe our signal," Tom Halstead remarked, thoughtfully.

"He could, suh, sutt'nly, but we wouldn't believe him."

Though the other motor boat was still well in the lead, it was not gaining in relative distance, but rather slowly losing. No one showed aft on the "Buzzard," and no heed was paid to the signal fluttering from the signal mast of the "Restless."

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"We've simply got to keep this up until we run within hail," muttered Tremaine.

"Too bad we're not a revenue cutter," sighed Skipper Tom.

"What, then?"

"We'd have a bow-gun, and could fire a shot past the 'Buzzard.'"

"Yo' get us a good bit nearer, Cap'n, an' maybe we can fire a shot past her, anyway," spoke up one of the Tampa policemen.

"Eh?" asked Tom.

"We've noticed, suh, that yo' have rifles on bo'd. Nothin' to stop us from sending a bullet by the other craft, only we've got to be mighty careful, suh, not to hit anyone on the 'Buzzard.'"

"We'll have you, in thirty minutes, I guess, where you can use a rifle," chuckled the young motor boat captain.

After twenty minutes the officer who had proposed the use of the rifle went below for one of the weapons. Armed with this, he first inspected the magazine, then stood well forward on the bridge deck at the port side. Presently, after judging his distance, the officer raised the rifle, sighted carefully, and fired.

Over the deck-house of the "Buzzard" a man's head and shoulders were visible, as he stood, facing the bow, at the steering wheel.

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An instant after the red flash leaped from the muzzle of the rifle this steersman on the other craft "ducked" suddenly, crouching for a few seconds before he ventured to rise.

"He shuah heard the bullet whistle by him," chuckled the other policeman.

"I must have shot proper close," remarked the marksman. "I don't mean to hit anybody, either."

After two or three minutes the man with the rifle fired again.

This time the man at the "Buzzard's" wheel did not dodge. Instead, he half turned, looking swiftly astern.

"Too—oo—oot!" sounded his whistle. Next, the "Buzzard's" speed slowed down, after which the craft swung around.

"He gives it up!" shouted Tom Halstead, gleefully.

Yet the next instant Tom and the others on the deck of the "Restless" cried out in horror.

Oliver Dixon had suddenly sprung up the after companionway of the "Buzzard." In his right hand the young man clutched a revolver. He waved his left hand to the oncoming pursuers, after which he raised the weapon to his temple.

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CHAPTER XXIV

CONCLUSION

"THE coward!" burst from Henry Tremaine's lips. Then, springing toward his wife and Ida Silsbee, he cried, hoarsely:

"Look away! Turn your backs!"

"It's all right, I guess," came from Tom Halstead, a few moments later.

For the man who had been at the "Buzzard's" helm had darted swiftly aft, leaped upon Oliver Dixon from behind, and borne him to the deck.

Just an instant later a glistening object was seen to whirl through the air and drop into the sea.

"It's all right, now," called Captain Tom Halstead. "They're fighting all over the deck, but Dixon is no match for the other fellow."

The "Restless" continued to cover the intervening distance at good speed. After a while the "Buzzard's" helmsman was seen to yank Oliver Dixon to his feet and thrust him down the companionway into the cabin.

"You take the wheel, now, Jeff," directed Halstead, reaching out for the megaphone.

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In a few minutes they were running alongside the other craft.

"'Buzzard,' ahoy!" hailed Tom Halstead.

"'Restless,' ahoy!" came the answer after some hesitation on the part of the "Buzzard." "Have you been pursuing us?"

"Think of something else to ask," retorted Skipper Tom, sarcastically.

"Have you any legal right to take our passenger from us?"

"You're in Florida waters, and we have Florida peace officers on board, who seek a thief," Halstead responded. "The water's smooth enough; shall we run alongside of you, instead of lowering a boat?"

"Yes, if you can do it without scratching our paint," came the assent from the "Buzzard."

"Do you take us for lubbers, after winning such a stiff race from you?" retorted Captain Halstead, ironically. "Look out, then. We're going to range up alongside and board you."

Jeff sped along the port rail, throwing over the fenders. Then the two motor craft bumped gently together. A deck-hand appeared on the other craft.

"Throw us your bow line, and take our stern line," requested the young motor boat captain.

These lines, fore and aft, were soon secured.

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Then the two Tampa policemen crossed to the other boat, followed by Henry Tremaine. Tom and Joe brought up the rear, leaving Jeff Randolph on the bridge deck of the "Restless."

"Your man is locked in the cabin," announced the skipper of the "Buzzard," a man of fifty. "I'll unlock the door for you."

When this had been done the two Tampa policeman descended first.

"You're our prisoner, Dixon," declared one of the officers.

"I guess I am, all right," came the dogged answer.

"We'll have to put these on yo', suh."

"Handcuffs?" rose the voice of Oliver Dixon, in protest. "Ugh! Such things belong to felons!"

"Well, suh, what do yo' consider yo'se'f?" demanded the policeman.

A groan that was almost a sob escaped the prisoner. Those waiting above heard the steel circlets click. Then they descended.

Oliver Dixon sat on one of the transom seats in the little cabin, his face a ghastly gray.

"I guess you're glad to see this, Halstead?" demanded the prisoner, holding up his manacled hands.

"As sorry as I can be!" retorted Tom Halstead, heartily. "It's a tough sight, Dixon."

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"It certainly is," groaned Henry Tremaine, turning to hide his face.

"If your ward, Tremaine, had been kind enough to accept me, I never would have come to this pass," declared the young man, coolly.

"Silence!" commanded Tremaine, sternly. "Don't dare couple Miss Silsbee's name with your own dishonored one!"

"Are you going to take me back to Tampa on this boat?" inquired Oliver Dixon after a moment's silence.

"On the 'Restless'," replied one of the policemen.

"You are going to bring me face to face—after this—with Mr. Tremaine's ladies?" demanded Dixon, paling still more. "That's tough treatment."

"You'll have to go on the 'Restless,' " insisted the policeman. "We have nothing to do with this craft."

President Haight, who had at first remained on the "Restless," now came over the side, appearing at the after companionway.

"Is the money safe?" inquired the bank man, huskily.

"You'll find it all in the satchel in that stateroom," stated Dixon, nodding at the door of the apartment in question.

The satchel was quickly brought out.

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Haight, as the most expert money-counter, was assigned to the task of counting then and there, which he did at the cabin table.

"Sixty thousand dollars, less seven hundred," he announced, finally. "Dixon, where's the missing seven hundred?"

"Ask Captain Beeman," rejoined the prisoner, nodding at the commander of the "Buzzard."

Captain Beeman looked at once alarmed.

"Why, gentlemen, that seven hundred dollars is what your friend——"

"Our prisoner," interrupted Haight.

"It's what your prisoner paid me to take him to the coast of Mexico."

"As it is stolen money, Captain Beeman," rejoined Mr. Haight, frigidly, "I reckon you'll have to give it up."

"That doesn't seem fair," argued Beeman, hoarsely. "I accepted the money, and I didn't know it to be stolen."

"No, of course; you didn't even suspect, when your passenger agreed to an exorbitant price for his fare to the Mexican coast," jeered the bank man. "You had so little suspicion, in fact, that you caused us to all but ruin our engines in the effort to reach you. You ignored our bunting signals after we hoisted them."

"I didn't see your signals," protested Bee-

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man, with an injured air. "I stopped as soon as you fired, and I realized——"

"When you realized that we meant business," sneered the policeman who had handled the rifle.

"We could not prove to the satisfaction of a court that Beeman deliberately tried to aid a fugitive to escape," broke in Tremaine, rather impatiently. "Haight, we'll let this captain keep his passage money. I'll make the amount good, for, at least, Beeman promptly and properly foiled Dixon's effort to destroy himself. So keep your passage money, Captain Beeman."

"I thank you, sir," cried the commander of the "Buzzard," his eyes lighting up with pleasure.

"None the less, Captain," went on Tremaine, dryly, "my private opinion is that you would have gone on laughing at us had the fates favored you."

"You wouldn't have got the money again, if I could have prevented it," sneered young Mr. Dixon. "I'd have burned it, only I saw I hadn't time. I'd have thrown the satchel overboard, but I knew it would float. The only weight I could find was my revolver, and I knew that wouldn't be heavy enough to make the satchel sink with all that paper in it."

"You're going back to Port Tampa, aren't you, Captain?" demanded one of the policemen

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of Beeman. "We are not going to arrest you, but we may want you as a witness."

"I'll go back to the port," nodded the commander of the "Buzzard."

As Oliver Dixon stepped over the rail and onto the deck of the "Restless," he hung his head, his gaze wandering along the seams of the deck. Mrs. Tremaine and Ida averted their eyes. Dixon was led below. With one of the policemen he was locked in the very port stateroom in which he had committed the theft of the ten thousand dollars.

For he afterwards admitted drugging and robbing Henry Tremaine. He also acknowledged that it was he who had sprung and fastened the door that had almost smothered Captain Halstead in the air chamber compartment.

When the two white men and the two negroes whom Captain Tom had brought in triumph out of the Everglades were arraigned for trial for their various offenses against the law, they confessed that they had constituted the once famous "Ghost of Alligator Swamp." This ghostly business of theirs had been carried on for the purpose of frightening hunters and cottagers away from Lake Okeechobee that their camps or bungalows might be robbed of any supplies. Occasionally, too, Uncle Tobey had succeeded in charging a goodly fee for "exorcising" the.

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ghost away from one bungalow or another, and these fees Uncle Tobey had always divided with the members of the gang. These members of the gang were all sent to the penitentiary for offenses committed in the past. Uncle Tobey, too, was "put away" on a charge of swindling.

Sim confessed that Oliver Dixon had met him in the woods, that night, and had urged him to abduct Captain Tom Halstead, representing that Henry Tremaine would readily pay three thousand dollars for the young man's safety. In Tom's absence Dixon had hoped to put his own plans through.

Within a few days it turned out that Oliver Dixon was wanted in the north for an act of dishonesty that he had believed would never be traced to him. As Tremaine was disinclined to drag his own household through the courts as witnesses, he arranged with the Florida authorities to drop the charge against Dixon, allowing him to be extradited to the Northern state where the young man was also wanted. Dixon is now serving a term in prison for embezzlement.

Six months afterwards Ida Silsbee became engaged to a cavalry officer in the Army, to whom she is now married.

The motors of the "Restless" proved to be uninjured. The boat and her crew remained for some weeks longer under charter to Henry

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Tremaine, most of the time being spent in cruising in Florida waters.

The Ghost of Alligator Swamp was so effectually laid that it has never been heard from since by the residents of lower Florida.

Jeff Randolph remained for some weeks aboard the "Restless," learning more and more about the work and the life. He is now a member of the Motor Boat Club, and mate aboard one of the largest motor yachts in Southern waters.

Ham Mockus is now assistant steward on one of the Havana boats.

Tom Halstead and Joe Dawson? They remained afloat, of course. They had their most stirring adventures and their most thrilling experiences with sea perils yet ahead of them, as will be related in the next volume of this series, which will be published at once under the title: "THE MOTOR BOAT CLUB AT THE GOLDEN GATE; Or, A Thrilling Capture in the Great Fog."

[THE END.]

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